

INTRODUCING ZIRTH

Justin Morgan

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CHAPTER ONE

From the journals of Kiviug Orion.

It's often difficult to find the planet Earth, even if you've been there many hundreds of times in the past. It certainly doesn't help when the Wormhole Network is down for routine maintenance. Do you realise how difficult it is to traverse that labyrinth on your own? And the deathly silence you meet about six hundred light years in is positively unnerving.

I was wandering through the square blue tunnels, humming a tune, thinking distantly about my family, my life and the true nature of seven-dimensional ducks. As you can probably tell, it gets very lonely in there. It wasn't that there was nobody else using the tunnels – certainly not; it's estimated that there are eight hundred billion life-forms using the network at any given space-time cross-section – it's just that the whole complex is spread over such a vast portion of the universe that the chance of meeting anybody else when you're there is a very good pal of Zero.

You might be struggling to imagine my surprise – or rather, my sheer stupefied paralysis – when a young gentleman in a psychedelic suit came out from a tunnel I didn't even know existed, humming the same tune as I.

He had a face like a plastic doll and a neat black hairdo that would make the Perfection Police of the planet Diputs incarcerate him on the spot. The suit he was wearing was so hurtful to the eyes, and so chromatically fantastical, that the dull blue walls virtually switched themselves off in shame. He had his hands in his pockets, making him appear both perfectly casual and perfectly authoritative. He acknowledged me with a perfectly proportioned smile and an almost imperceptible nod of his head. I confess, however, that I could muster up no gesture in response.

As I have already explained, it is unheard of to find someone else wandering the wormhole tunnels. Indeed, meeting someone in a multi-colour multi-pattern hyper-suit that makes a kaleidoscope look like a sloth watching grass grow – in any part of the universe – is pretty improbable. Even someone humming the same tune as you without your knowing it is quite an eyebrow-raising coincidence. But this? The word 'bizarre' is adequate in describing the subject of seven-dimensional ducks, but this occurrence was on a level of erratic

weirdness that was unprecedented in the history of surreal anomalies.

"Looking for the planet Earth?" he said.

I don't know how long I was unconscious after that. But I do remember hearing, "How are you feeling?" from the mysterious man. "Everything OK now?" he was saying.

"Yes, yes, fine," I answered, as everybody would. "Thanks," I said then, as he helped me to my feet.

"This is the first time I've been to this part of the universe," he said, and began to walk onwards down the tunnel. I walked with him.

"Oh right. Well, as you may have noticed, they're doing routine maintenance around here. Of course, it only takes a century or two, and because they do it in a separate time continuum, it's usually not a problem. But unfortunately, because of our very limited knowledge of the manipulation of four-dimensional membranes, there's still a strong probability that the work period will intersect with our space-time."

"Yes, I gathered all that."

"Oh you gathered it did you?" I replied sceptically, hoping I did not sound too rude.

All too quickly he responded, "Yes I did. It's on the notice just around here."

We came to a junction, the one for which I was destined, and the one that would take me to Upsilon Wing, Division 99. As we turned the corner, I saw at once the fateful sign, just as my new acquaintance had predicted:

"The Corfizz Wormhole Network Maintenance Company regrets to announce that this space-time portal has been closed, temporarily. If you are reading this sign from in front of it, then you are just ninety-five light years from the diversion path, and eight light years from the nearest S-T Express Station.

"Corfizz would like to remind travellers that any use of a wormhole in, on, through, under, or below this tunnel network during the maintenance period may result in transportation to an arbitrary point in space or time, and/or other adverse effects.

"Have a nice day."

"I thought you said you hadn't been here before," I said.

"Yes," he answered, "I thought I said that too."

"So why are you here?" I asked him. He took me back to the junction where he had come from.

"What is that?" said I, looking at the thing he had started dragging out from the tunnel.

"It's a pink bench," he replied. There was an awkward pause.

"What are you doing with it?" I said.

"It's a pink bench," he repeated. "It's for sitting on."

"Yes I gathered that. What are you doing with it?"

"I'm delivering it to the planet Earth."

"Who on Earth would want a hideous bench like that?" I thought to myself.

"Well, nobody," he responded, "It's going in to an outdoor display."

I was astounded – had he just read my mind?

"Anyway," he said, "It must be difficult to find the planet Earth, especially with the wormhole network down like it is. It'll take an eternity to get there. If not more."

"Well..." I began, but he interrupted.

"Since we're headed in the same direction," he said, "It seems only natural that we help each other to get there."

A section of space-time ripped, opening up like a zip. It flexed and pulsated, and then began to open out, rotating clockwise, and revealing the wormhole within.

"You're not going to go through there are you?" I said. I couldn't have him do anything drastic in a dangerous place like this. Could I?

"Do you want to get there or not?"

We stepped through the wormhole together.

Suddenly the tunnels were alive. This was how they were meant to be travelled. High speed. Like a roller-coaster. The blue plasma became just streaks of light – flashing past, flashing past.

"Now look what you've done!" I tried to shout, the words rapidly getting lost light years behind us. We were heading for a rift. The tunnel opened out. It just ended abruptly, giving out onto the vast stretches of empty space, an endless void. Ahead was a tunnel... An individual tunnel. Disjointed. Floating. Upright in space. We were heading for its base.

Like a trap in a tomb, two metal structures swung towards us from nowhere. I tried to scream. But no-one could hear.

"The Corfizz Emergency Travel Seats," came an echoing voice instead, "are there for your protection." A seat was attached to the end of the metal extrusion. It hammered into place, right beneath me. The second structure did likewise, fitting perfectly beneath the other. The two seats formed something like an intergalactic ski lift...

...But without the cables.

"Corfizz apologises for the break in the network."

The seat moved them to the base of the tunnel. It hovered ominously beneath it. There was a fraction of a second. And then it made its move, shooting up – up through the tunnel itself, headlong in line for a wormhole at the top...

Screams were left behind. We were racing through a terrestrial landscape. White marble streaks. Green river. Green vegetation. Heading for a white, round arch.

"This could be anywhere in the universe!"

We shot straight through it. Through the canopy of an acacia tree. And up. Out beyond that world and back. Back to the tunnels. We rocketed through the network. Left. Right. Vertical plummet. No time to think or breathe or see or contemplate the energy.

We were out. This time a vast, complex tunnel. In the middle of space. Shaped like a giant letter 'R'. I vaguely saw the outline shapes of Corfizz worker robots. Repairing portals. The hole in the R. It was... yes – a wormhole. Made to measure. We blasted through it. Straight away another wormhole. Circular in shape. I tried to close my eyes. But no chance of escape. I squinted them open. Just for a moment. I was being propelled... Straight into a wooden barrier. We crashed through it. Then another opened up for us. Semi-circular it was. And another and another, cast open like doors. We turned over in the tunnel, seeing the doors on their side now. The car spiralled round it. Dizzying and nauseating and

Crash.

Back in the open. We looped a half-finished loop, a slate construction. And gazed upside-down as the grass below them sped past. Just a haze of green. Another scream as we crashed onto the ground, rolling over and over and over... until upright again. We were heading for a tower. A thin, modern sort of tower. A single column. Small square windows. One was a portal. We burst through it with renewed energy. Replenished vigour shot us through the network like

a catapult of the gods. We were thrust under an arch. Then a 'g' shaped wormhole. Narrowly avoided. Then out...

"Look," said my companion, calm as ever.

That was it. My destination. Somehow we'd got to it. It was, set against the inky backdrop of space: the planet Earth.

Yes – I looked. We both looked. We both looked on as the blue-green sphere grew closer and closer and closer. Soon the blackness of space was obscured totally by the planet. We shot farther down. Below – water met land and cloud met sky. We were plummeting through the clouds. Then down, and further down and at last, in such a flash of flame and violent velocity as to be almost invisible to any on-lookers, we rocketed through the air... on and on we went, until the final crash to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

"It was definitely him," said Miranda, leaning over the conference table. "An adviser to the chancellor."

"Former adviser to the chancellor," her boss corrected.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Now what," she said, with a tone of triumph, "do you make of that?"

"Have you lost the plot entirely?" said her boss.

"What plot? This is only chapter two."

"Are you out of your head? You are an obsessive, Miranda! A downright obsessive!" He bandied his arms about in almost contortionist-style gesticulations as he made his response. "Are you seriously trying to suggest that a senior official of the government..."

"Former senior official of the government," she corrected.

"What difference does it make? Are you seriously suggesting that he is in league with some kind of extraterrestrial influences? Can you not see that he was merely lunching with somebody that simply happened to be a member of a magician's circle? What sort of journalists do you think we are here?"

Miranda's boss was the sort of person that spoke almost exclusively in rhetorical questions. He was a stern, boring-grey-suit person, with wispy grey hair.

The fake teak conference table at which they were all sat was made of MDF and had a less than convincing veneer that looked like pine, but was really some species of plastic and was in complete contrast to all the other colours in the room. Miranda had blonde hair, and an exceptionally pale complexion. She had the kind of convincing, world-changing smile that took her little or no effort to produce, and accordingly went completely ignored in conferences with colleagues.

"I saw it with my own eyes," she protested, "And there's no doubt that it would sell. Everyone knows he was pushing for greater spending in the space agency and *the supernatural*."

"You may think you saw it with your own eyes, but you didn't get a photograph of it did you?"

"Well that's the point!" she said, almost yelling, "They vanished before I could get a chance!"

"Look here – do you think people can't face up to the facts? An adviser in government goes to Paris. He meets some sort of business acquaintance and they decide to have lunch together. The man turns

out to be a bit of a magician, so he shows him a trick where a playing card is pushed through a table. Nothing strange in that at all, is there?"

"And they both disappear into thin air."

"OK – so that's a little on the strange side, but who in their right mind is going to believe it without any solid evidence in front of them? I'm telling you – unexplained, weird occurrences just don't happen in this part of the world, and—"

There was no warning that the ceiling was about to collapse in, and that a giant metal ski lift bench holding two men, one in a psychedelic suit, would crash into the middle of the room.

"Er, I'm frightfully sorry..." said the plainly dressed man, smiling nervously.

A pink bench shortly followed in plummeting into the room.

From the journals of Kiviuq Orion.

"Quick," I said, "Erase their memories."

We set to work. I don't know why that guy had a portable Corfizz Brain Box, but I was in a panic. We got the job done twice as fast, and that was my concern. There was no real resistance – it's amazing how pliable people's body's become when they're in a state of shock – or rather, paralysed stupefaction! There were four men, and one woman. We did two of the men each. A swift beep and they would never remember a thing.

I thought to myself, as the glazed expression over one of the guy's faces lay in front of me, why ever did I listen to that crazed creature in the tunnels? We could have been killed! Of course, with hindsight, the trip was quite an adventure, quite an experience.

A glowing silver oval began to swirl around as it hovered in the air at the far end of the room. I looked on.

"Wormhole," my companion whispered. The oval opened out, tearing away the space as it did, and revealing...

"Marcus Jule," said Marcus Jule, standing in the mouth of the wormhole. It was a good job the Earth residents around us were still unconscious! "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," I said, "We've been hiding the evidence."

"Well, are you all right? As executive of Corfizz Universal, I'm responsible for the safety of all employees, and during the maintenance period, we're on an especially high alert."

"We're fine, really. Thank you for coming after us."

Mr. Jule looked at the man in the psychedelic suit for a time, perhaps expecting him to say something. In the end, he just smiled at him, and nodded, evidently not nearly as perturbed by the outlandish choice of outfit as I had been.

"Well, I was in the neighbourhood as it was," Marcus added, "The neighbourhood of galaxies that is."

"We appreciate it," I said. Yes – I was probably grovelling a bit much, but he is one of the most powerful men in the universe! "We appreciate it immensely," I went on, "I realise what difficulty it must have been to get that sort of a wormhole going in times like these."

"Don't even think of it. Laboriousness is of no significance when it comes to the welfare of lives." He was genuinely sincere. His eyes twinkled, his hands were clasped together. I've always liked Marcus Jule. "But of course," he said, "I shall have to be going. You are sure you are all right?"

"Quite certain," I said. He gave a last nod at both of us, turned around and headed for the wormhole.

"Thank you," the pink bench seller said. "Thank you indeed."

We watched as the wormhole closed in around the diminishing figure of Marcus Jule.

"We'd best repair this place, get rid of this stuff and then get out of here," I said as I stared at the last silvery sparkles of the wormhole, flickering and dying. I looked around to my companion. I did a full three sixty. He'd vanished.

And he'd taken his pink bench with him.

CHAPTER THREE

From the journals of Oberon Furrow

I was definitely being followed. All through Shivers Lane and Church Street he was lingering behind. His eyes were transfixed ahead of him, looking purposeful and suspicious. I was panicking. I never thought that *I* would be the victim of a stalker, despite the countless news reports I had read. I slowed down.

Just as I had expected, the man slowed down too. I quickened my pace. So did my follower, as though personifying my shadow. I could feel my heart beating faster, but I knew I'd reach home soon... A subtle glance or two was all I got of him, and I saw only that he had straight black hair and was wearing a straight neat suit. His actions seemed almost robotic.

The house was coming up, on the left-hand side. As I was about to turn into the drive, I suddenly felt his presence close in from behind, and a tingling of fright washed through me. Before I could initiate a defence of any kind, I heard a slight beeping sound, and then the man passed by me and my home completely, walking on down the road without looking back.

When I'd made it inside, I poured myself a glass of water to freshen my dry throat. I was shivering, and I sat down on the sofa, rubbing my hands together. Looking back now – what a wimp I seemed to be!

I sat staring at the fireplace, but paying it no attention whatever – my thoughts wholly occupied by the events of the last few days. Yesterday was the worst. I thought deeply about my occupations, and how, with so few years of employability behind me, I had managed to lose two very comfortable job positions. The reason? Why, the boss had simply announced that morning there would be 'inevitable redundancies', before proceeding to declare those people that would be redundant, in the afternoon. But I am sure it had something to do with my last job. I suppose I could empathise: a mistake in the treasury and I'm instantly liable for more damaging mistakes in an accounting firm, but could I ever be employable again? I could speculate all I wanted, but the minds of the powers that be will always remain a mystery to me.

So yet again, with just five months of experience in the industry, I was now job hunting again. I had just been to the village

shop for some essentials; it was on my return that that man had followed me. I was probably just being paranoid to suspect him of stalking. But what was that beeping sound?

Next day I decided I would eat lunch out. The fact is, it's uncomfortable eating at home alone. And it was a hot and sunny day; one that would no doubt form a string of hot days in the UK's new-found climate, fuelled, at least in part, by the very vehicles that had lined up in a traffic jam just next to me. I headed for the local café in New Street on foot. Driving, of course, would be futile.

It was not a pleasant experience to walk down the village streets. The sides of the road were clogged with litter, and the noise and the fumes continually emanating from the traffic that was constantly dominating the roads was nearly unbearable. I usually try to take my mind off it all by thinking of other things, but this has the potential disadvantage of making me knock into passers-by.

Upon arrival I sat at one of the tables of the outdoor section of the café. The other tables outside were occupied, so when another customer arrived he sat at the same table as me. He did not smile or gesture in any way, just sat and began to read his newspaper.

After a few minutes, another man arrived on the scene. His character could not have been more contrasting... He was wearing an exemplary smart and tidy suit, and had neatly presented short dark hair. His eyes were vibrant, and his smile appeared unusually friendly.

"Hello," he greeted us both confidently as he sat down. The man with the newspaper said nothing in response.

"Hello," I answered tentatively. The waitress was attending to some other people, so I sat still, thinking – one of my favourite pastimes, in fact. What was the real reason for losing my job? That was the one question still on my mind. Of course, I was a reliable person – I'd always been on time for work and had rarely missed a deadline in my life. At least, I think I was reliable. It's only when I look back on things like this that I realise how indecisive I am.

"Inevitable city job losses," the polite man muttered, though quite audibly. I frowned. There was a pause. My eyes drifted. I read the headline of the article that that man was probably reading at the time. This stunned me. It read: 'inevitable city job losses'. The polite man was opposite the newspaper and could not possibly have seen

right through it. Despite this, the first man remained silent. I continued thinking. If I were to buy a newspaper, I supposed, perhaps I may see the reason – the official reason, if no other – that I was now unemployed.

"I have a spare newspaper," the polite man said to me. He reached under the table, producing a newspaper, "in my bag," he added, "that was under the table," he then qualified. He handed the paper to me.

"Thank you very much," I murmured, taking it cautiously. Was this man a stalker too? Did he know about me and my job loss? Or was he going to offer me a job?

I examined the offending article. It was quite boring actually, simply stating the likely companies from which losses could occur and the corresponding industries that might suffer. There were no concrete reasons. I decided to be more cautious about this polite man, knowing I can trust very few people in this day and age. I laid the newspaper down on the table.

Enter waitress. Her face looked most terribly glum. She did not even say 'can I take your order?' – she simply waited alert with her notepad, assuming we had noticed. I was going to order a green salad.

"The man reading the newspaper would like a coffee," said the polite man, "and Ober... the other gentleman would like a green salad. I would like a cup of coffee also, please."

The first man lowered his newspaper to stare at the polite person, an element of trepidation emanating from his eyes.

"How did you know?" he half-whispered. The waitress simply answered:

"I see," and she went off to prepare the orders. The man brought his newspaper back up to his face, and carried on reading indifferently.

Meanwhile, I was edging my chair gradually further away from the 'polite' man. I noticed my breathing was somewhat irregular. My life had been so quiet in the past, and now I was trying to decide if someone was a stalker or not. But I could have sworn he had almost said my name – I was sure of it...

I looked at the man. He was certainly well dressed, but on closer inspection, he seemed to be – how can I put it? – unrealistic, I suppose, almost computerised, just like that man in the street that had

followed me. Was it some sort of clan? He smiled, and I turned back to the newspaper. The waitress would undoubtedly be a long time getting the orders because there were so many customers.

"Would you like a game of chess while we wait?" the polite man asked, "She'll be some time because there are so many customers."

I felt my eyes widening and my mouth slowly opening. It was as if the man could read minds! The other bloke at the table was still paying absolutely no attention to what was going on.

"N... n... no thank you," I replied.

"OK then," the polite man said and smiled once more. I wasn't used to people smiling that often or being so polite; I was almost tempted to get up and run away, but for some reason, I found myself glued to the seat with irresistible curiosity. It was all so very unnerving, as well, if not vaguely spooky.

Eventually, the green salad and the two coffees arrived at the table. As the polite man drank his coffee, he looked around him in all directions, mostly at the sky, taking in all the details of his surroundings. The other man drank his coffee, his face not visible behind the newspaper.

"Is that tasty?" the polite man asked me.

"Yes thanks," was my admittedly shy answer.

"I shall have a green salad next time I come here," he said, making conversation. Really, I'd never known anyone like this. It was like etiquette and morality had entered the human psyche again! The polite gentleman had now finished his coffee. He left the table with a final smile, and went around the corner of the street, disappearing from view.

I was soon in my sitting room, contemplating the events that had just occurred while reading the newspaper that the man had forgotten to collect before leaving. Suddenly, the background monotony of relentless traffic was interrupted by the sound of car horns, screeching tyres and then a stomach-clenching *crash*. Another motor accident. They were commonplace outside my home – not because there was any particularly tricky configuration of lanes, road markings or traffic lights, but because of simple facts about the highway: firstly, cars are machines of destruction, and secondly, cars are machines of destruction driven by human beings. In my opinion,

there is simply no better recipe for disaster. But what can *I* do about it?

The doorbell rang. I looked out of the window at the front of the house (can't be too careful about who who's at the door) and saw that it was a late postman with a parcel. I trotted into the hallway and opened up the door. I saw once again that the postman did not look very 'real' either. What was going on? Was it a fancy dress party? A gang of neo-criminals? Robots? The man was dressed simply, and had an expressionless face. When he extended out his arm to hand me the package, he barely moved his lips to speak, though his words still came very clear, just like a ventriloquist. I did not recognise this postman from previous deliveries.

"A delivery for you," he said. I took the cubic cardboard parcel cautiously. I thanked the man, shut the door, and went back into the living room to open up the unexpected package.

There were no instruction leaflets, no promotional fliers and no invoice note – there was certainly no indication of who had sent it. Inside was a black device. It had just one black button. On one side of the device were the words, in white capital letters: 'Translator Device'. Even more curious was the opposite side of it, on which was printed what appeared to be a corporate logo. It was in green. There were two words, the second being printed in smaller lettering underneath the first with a line separating the two. The words in the logo were: 'Corfizz Universal'.

I'd never heard of it, and I would have looked it up straight away on the Internet, if the computer was not out of action due to a virus. I would have to fix the computer, or look it up in a book later, but first, I wanted to know how to work this so-called translator device.

But I was interrupted by the 'phone.

"Hello?" I said. Remembering the limits of technology, I got up to pick up the receiver first.

"Hello Oberon; it's Victor here."

Victor, Victor Ledrey, is my best, and only real, friend. We are equal in age, and met each other at university, from which we had remained friends ever since. If I could trust anybody, I thought I could at least trust Victor. At least he didn't make any accountancy jokes.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm fine thank you. You?"

"I think I'm fine, but unemployment, and so quickly, is just so difficult. And, to make it worse, my computer is kaput."

"Computers are always going wrong," Victor answered as if it were the norm, "and you mustn't worry about your job. Something will turn up."

"Speaking of things turning up, I had a parcel come today, and I don't know who on Earth it was from. But it was a strange thing. It's some sort of gadget; it says it's a 'translator device', and the company is 'Corfizz Universal'. Have you heard of them?"

"I can't say I have," Victor replied.

"Are you busy?" I asked. I invited him over to see it. He sounded bored, after all. "Oh, and there's bad traffic on the road past my house," I warned him.

"There's bad traffic everywhere," Victor said. "You just have to get used to it. See you in a moment then."

I approached the black device that was lying on my sofa next to the box in which it had come. I decided that I would not try to use it until Victor had arrived.

It took twenty minutes before he did, even though we both knew for a fact that our houses should be less than a ten minute journey from each other. We greeted each other and sat down on the sofa. I took the device in my hand and then let Victor examine it (the device, not my hand, that is. Although Victor had once studied palmistry, he gave it up on the grounds that it gave him nightmares).

"'Corfizz Universal' he read. Never heard of it. We'll have to look on the Internet." I should have asked Victor to do that before he came! Never mind. "Nothing much else to do with it but press the button is there?" Victor said.

He placed it on the sofa in front of him, and pressed the button quite firmly. From the device, a voice echoed out around us, speaking not for very long, and speaking in a foreign language. However, this was not any ordinary foreign language that we might have had a chance of recognising. This voice – female it sounded – was using sounds and words that neither I nor Victor would ever be able to repeat. We just wouldn't have the vocal chords that could cope with it! Furthermore, I'm sure it would have been impossible to transliterate the speech.

"What language is *that*?" Victor whispered, although there was

no particular reason for whispering.

"It's not repeatable is it?" I observed, with a slight smile, but the whole experience was rather eerie, in fact, and sent a shiver up my spine momentarily. Then the voice said another few words, almost as if replying to me. We paused in silence for a while.

I tried the button myself. The original speech came out again, exactly as before.

"What do we do?" said Victor. At this, the voice said its smaller second phrase.

"I don't know. I don't understand it." Then suddenly I remembered the incident at the café, "And there's something else I don't understand. I went to the café in New Street for lunch this afternoon, and there was this peculiar man there. He was incredibly polite, and it..." I was about to say that it seemed as though he could read people's minds, but it would have sounded so silly. I told myself I was obviously imagining it. I completed the sentence: "it was strange."

"Polite people are still in existence I suppose," Victor answered, "Anyway, shall we try and fix your computer?"

I agreed grudgingly and we climbed the stairs to the computer. Victor turned it on; it worked first time.

"Typical!" I said, wondering briefly what had happened to the virus.

"Don't worry," Victor said, "It happens to me too you know."

"I very much doubt it," I muttered cynically.

"Well it used to be all right didn't it? When you had that other system?"

"Yeah, I suppose it was OK, but it was just too much of a risk. And then of course I got the Letter..."

"Yeah, shame. 'Course, you remember it happened to me too? On a grander scale."

"It did?"

"Don't you remember? When you were in London and couldn't come to my party?"

"Oh yes," I said, remembering.

"Yes, and we were going to watch that new film: of course, I forgot that I'd bought a new DVD player, and I hadn't gotten 'round to removing the DRM chip. Nasty business it was. Body heat sensors in the device detected that there were more than three people watching it.

And then the police came, of course. Sad really – my mate Dan was just coming in with the piña coladas and even he had to pay a few hundred."

"Weren't you in prison for a while?"

"I don't want to talk about it, to be honest. Let's get this search under way whilst it's working."

Victor made a search on the Internet for "Corfizz Universal". To my amazement, there were only two 'fatal' errors. The computer was working at its best! As to the result, the search engines consistently announced that there was nothing to be found.

"Must have been a phoney of some kind, or a joke," said Victor.

"Why would somebody play such a joke?" I reasoned.

"I don't know. Some people are mad. In fact, most people are mad, but that's beside the point."

"So why on Earth was it delivered to me?" I said.

Little did Oberon Furrow know that the phrase 'on Earth', in fact, had nothing whatever to do with it.

The following day was cooler, and Oberon decided to try and make the most of the last ounces of fresh air still left in the outdoors. So, he strode out of the house and took a walk through the village, his hands in his pockets and his nose consistently irritated by car fumes.

A woman in a black dress passed him, going in the opposite direction. She was probably off to a funeral in the church at the other end of the road. She did not say a word. Instead, a jackdaw crowed at him from atop a nearby hedge, and as he moved on, it followed him overhead. He craned his neck upwards to track the flight of the bird, gauging its comparative swiftness to how sluggish the vehicles on the main road were travelling. Then he saw something very unusual entering his field of view. It looked like a brown hat, flying in a wind turbulence some way above the jackdaw. But he had no more time for investigation because he had just knocked into another woman in black.

"Look where you're going!" she yelled, giving him a frightfully scornful look. He apologised sincerely, but she seemed to ignore him, walking off towards the church while adjusting her jet black scarf. When he looked back to the skies, there was no hat to be seen, and the

jackdaw was swooping down on to a lamppost. As he walked on, it hopped from lamppost to lamppost until they were both right outside the pub.

He did not yet have a clear idea of where he was heading, in actual fact, and reasoned with himself that if he stepped inside the pub he could come up with an idea in there; although the real reason was that he could not stand exercise and got out of breath hazardously quickly. It was just a consequence of sitting in an office all day, he concluded.

Oberon Furrow was of a nervous disposition and was not a man of notable dexterity as far as his hands were concerned, for he spent a considerable amount of time in social situations wondering where to put them. He could speak conversational German, but did not have much of an opportunity to use this skill; and he was mathematically adept as well as being a keen student of English language and literature, such that he had always been the subject of some schoolroom teasing. Even with great intellectual potential, the man was continually ostracised as old-fashioned, accident-prone and too industrious for his own good; hence at the age of twenty-five he was now an unemployed bachelor. Oberon himself knew that he was an anxious and highly agitated person, who had actually come to like living a quiet life.

When he was inside the pub, a variety of others entered after him. In fact, this collection of people could not reasonably have *been* more varied. One was Victor, who had just got out of his car at the side of the road and was unaware that Oberon was in the pub; one was the man that had been following Oberon the previous day; the other was the very polite man from the café.

"A mineral water please," Oberon ordered from the barman, who looked at him as though water was a dangerous substance. 'Well what's wrong with not liking alcohol?' Oberon always thought.

"Here you are," muttered the barman and Oberon paid and took it to the table by the window.

When Victor walked in he got himself a drink and went straight to the table furthest from Oberon, where he sat down with a group of acquaintances with whom he immediately struck animated conversation.

The polite man from the café went to the table behind

Oberon's, where Oberon could not see him. He sat quietly and did not order a drink.

Meanwhile, the possible stalker ordered a drink, before sitting casually at Oberon's table. It was evident that the characteristic beer-and-cigarette-smoke pub smell displeased the man, as he was constantly twitching his nose and fumbling with tissues.

As soon as Oberon saw the man and recognised him, he began to panic. Should he run away now? Or would that look too dramatic? No, he told himself, this was a perfectly harmless gentleman that happened to have been walking behind him the other day. Surely. Positively. Oberon fidgeted with his hands and took abrupt spasmodic sips of his water to wet his throat. And then the man spoke to him.

"Nice day today," he said.

Barely audibly, Oberon said "yes" in an extremely hesitant mumble accompanied by excessive head-nodding and lip-quivering.

A couple of tall muscular men walked past the table conspicuously, muttering under their breath "he's an accountant" in a mocking way.

"Are you an accountant by any chance?" asked the man. Oberon nodded slowly. "Good qualifications for that I expect?"

"Actually," said Oberon, "I'm not an accountant any more. I used to be."

"Oh. Is everything going all right?"

"More... more or less."

"Interested in figures then? Statistics? Mathematics? Surveys and the art of data analysis?"

Calling it an art was going too far in Oberon's opinion. But he agreed anyway. The man finished his drink, smiled and walked away. Oberon sighed.

'You see?' a part of his brain said to himself, 'Everything was all right. You were panicking for nothing as usual'.

Oberon drained his glass and stared out of the window, lost in his own thoughts and not paying attention to anyone else.

"More drinks?" Victor asked his friends around the table. The reply was unanimously positive, so Victor went to the bar and gave his order, where he met the man that had been previously talking to Oberon.

"Do you know that man by the window?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Victor replied, noticing Oberon sitting in a world of his own, "That's a friend of mine. Why?"

"Is he a well educated man?"

"What's it to you?"

"I... I may offer him a job."

"Oh, I see. Well-educated? I'll say. He's an accountant. He studied finance. And he speaks conversational German. You won't find a finer mind in the county. In fact, you won't find a finer mind in the *country*. In his earlier career, he was adviser to the chancellor – but we don't talk about that."

"Really...? Well, thank you, young man. Thank you very much. I must be away now. Goodbye." The man left the pub with a quick pace, and Victor returned to his table with the drinks. He decided he'd speak to Oberon later.

Meanwhile, the polite man from the café marched out of the pub too, where he proceeded in perching expectantly on the lamppost.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the journals of Oberon Furrow.

While in the pub I had decided to go to the park, where pollution was not so much a problem. When I left the building, the jackdaw that had been following me also accompanied me to the park. When I got there, I noticed that the nearest seat was completely surrounded by piles of litter – I would have almost had to wade through it to reach it. I recalled from my childhood that I used to have to wade through leaves that had fallen in autumn. It was (officially) autumn now, but there was a higher proportion of litter over there than leaves. I was powerless against it, but all the same appalled and disgusted.

Something else suddenly caught my eye. Was it... was it a bench? Yes – just in front of the trees of the forest behind the park. It was a seat... with a difference. I had to look several times to make sure it really was a mineral water I'd got at the pub. I rubbed my eyes. Nope – it was definitely pink. There was no doubt about it. But why hadn't anybody else noticed it?

I walked up to it, hands in pockets. I stood next to it for a while. Then I stood behind it, staring at it all the time.

It was still pink.

I bent down to inspect it. A lady with a fluffy scarf and a fluffy dog to match gave me a strange look as she passed. After much pondering, I finally sat down on it. The jackdaw perched on the back of the seat just next to me. I took a deep breath of the air. I certainly noticed the difference from the air over the roads. However, after a minute or so, I found it more difficult to breathe because someone had come near the bench and started smoking. I detest the idea of passive smoking. A quick scan of the park revealed that all of the other seats were taken, except the one buried in litter, so I thought I would just have to grin and bare it.

When the smoker had puffed off somewhere else, I was relieved, and continued to think properly. However, I had mindless children on skateboards to watch. I could almost hear what they were saying to each other, but I'd have no chance in understanding it. It was an almost entirely alien language to me; it not only seemed to be informal back-street slang, but heavily Americanised too. However, it was not quite as difficult as the language spoken on the Translator Device.

The jackdaw that had been following me for some time fluttered off the seat and out of sight, and equally suddenly, a familiar face appeared in front of me. It was all so sudden; it almost seemed as though the man had popped into the park from thin air. The shock made me jump and I shifted slightly down the seat to lean against the arm rest.

"Hello again," said the polite man from the café. "We met at the café." He smiled again and extended his hand to me. I shook it, rather cautiously, but the polite man shook mine with confidence. He sat down on the bench, unperturbed by its colour.

"What's your name?" I asked a little shyly.

"Er..." said the man, and then I saw his body "flicker" slightly, as though I had blinked several times in quick succession. Well, maybe I had – I'd never seen it happen before. "My name is Ganymede, Zeus Ganymede. Pleased to meet you Ob... And what is your name?"

"Oberon Furrow," I replied, feeling tense. "Do you live around here?"

"Me?" Zeus said and chuckled slightly. "No. I'm here... I'm here on business," and he smiled once again.

"What business are you in?" I asked him, trying not to sound as if I were prying. I wanted to know if this was a stalker or not.

"I'm in web site design," he answered with no stutters this time. Interesting, I thought.

"Yes it is," Zeus said.

"Is what?"

"Interesting. You said it was interesting. And it is."

"I didn't say that," I told him. I had thought it – to myself – but not said it.

"Didn't you? Silly me." Zeus hastened to change the subject: "Have you seen those skaters over there?" Without giving me chance to reply, he said "So have I. They look mindless don't they? And the way they speak too – it seems quite a lot different from the... from the English I learnt."

"You didn't give me chance to reply," I interrupted.

"Did I not?"

Could stalkers read your mind and tell the future with accuracy? No, nobody could do that. So who was this man?

"Are you reading my mind or something?" I asked. Zeus got up from the seat quickly.

"I must be going," he said, and walked around the seat in quick strides. He headed towards the forest behind us.

"Why?" I said.

"I have web sites to design," Zeus answered, stopping momentarily to say so.

"Which web sites?"

"Corfizz Universal," Zeus said with haste, and then turned and quick marched through the trees of the forest. I pursued him.

"Wait!" I called, "What do you know about Corfizz?" Zeus did not reply. He was far too fast for me, even though neither of us were running. Zeus turned behind a tree, obscuring himself from my view. Eventually I caught up with the tree he had gone behind, and when I looked, there was nobody there.

I knocked on the trunk of the tree. I don't know why, but it seemed like the sort of thing people would do in surrealistic fantasy comedies. Unexpectedly, I heard numerous fast-paced knocks back! I tried it again, with the same result. However, the tree certainly did not feel hollow. I stepped around to the other side of the tree, and found, perching on a branch, there was a woodpecker, knocking at the trunk with its beak. I sighed.

Everyone seemed to be getting in my way when I was walking home. I was thinking deeply about the nature of this Zeus Ganymede, and was not concentrating too much about where I was going. I bumped into a woman who was smoking.

"I'm terribly sorry," I apologised. I was sure the woman had muttered some swear word under her breath. As I walked on, I collided with a man carrying a briefcase, and knocked the briefcase out of his grasp.

"Look where you're going!" the man yelled.

"I'm ever so sorry," I said. The man turned to collect his briefcase, and only just snatched it in time before another man in a balaclava took hold of it instead.

"Were you about to steal my briefcase?" the man asked the would-be-thief with anger. I stepped away, hearing heated arguments in the background.

I held my head up from now on. But it was not a particularly

good view. I coughed suddenly. The reason was clear: more than half of the people I was walking past were smoking, and a considerable number had children with them, at that. Some were talking on their mobile 'phone simultaneously. Why my throat seemed to be aggravated by smoke more than other people, I didn't know. The noise from the traffic was overpowering at this point, and people had to shout to be heard. There was no break in the traffic either, and the vehicles barely moved a metre a minute. Every now and again people would sound the horn in their car. When I looked at the people in the cars, half of *them* were smoking too, and a considerable number of them, again, had children in the back seats, some without their seat belt on.

"What are you looking at?" shouted a man from the car at which I happened to be glancing. I looked away quickly and marched back towards my house.

I was only too glad to reach home. But the horror did not stop. There was graffiti all over the walls. Not again! It was a good job I had bought so much paint for the walls the last time this had happened. I decided I would start painting after lunch. It was quite some time past my normal lunch period anyway. I went inside and had a meal of beans on toast. The beans were in stupidly small cans; they were exorbitantly expensive at the same time. Everything seemed to be very expensive nowadays. Even a good sized loaf of sliced bread cost a whole two euros.

After lunch, I flopped down on the bed for a nap. Yes, unemployment had good points as well as bad points. I shut my eyes... and the 'phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello! Is Natasha there?" said a cheerful young woman's voice.

"No. I'm afraid you have the wrong number," I said.

"Oh," said the woman, "Right," and she hung up. I returned to my nap. I had just shut my eyes... and the doorbell rang. I went to the window. It was Victor. I made my way downstairs and opened up the door.

"Hello," said Victor, "Are you busy?"

"No," I replied, "come in." We went to the lounge and sat down where the Translator Device still resided.

"I suppose you'll be painting your house again," said Victor.

"Yes. Oh! I was going to do that after lunch but I forgot."

"Never mind. I was just passing so I thought I would come round to see how you were and everything," Victor said.

"Thanks, but anyway, Victor, there's something I want to discuss with you."

"Yes?"

"You remember I mentioned a polite person at a café yesterday?"

"Yes I remember," said Victor.

"Well I met him again today. His name's Zeus Ganymede. And... There was this other strange thing about him. You see, he could read my mind, and he could also tell what I was going to say in the future. And he knew my name before I told him, I'm sure."

"Read your mind?" Victor repeated, quite taken aback. There was a pause. Then Victor smiled slowly, before laughing nearly to hysterics.

"And he disappeared behind a tree!" I added.

"Look," Victor said, when he had stopped laughing, "you've been under a lot of strain lately. You're stressed because of your job and because of the computer..."

"No seriously," I interrupted him, "I heard him. He knew everything. And he just vanished in the forest!"

"You've got bags beneath your eyes, Oberon," Victor informed me, "look in the mirror."

"But," I began, but before I said anything else I got up silently and went to the mirror that was hanging on the opposite wall. Yes, I did look distinctly tired.

"Yes you're right," I said.

"It's a direct consequence of being fired," Victor said in likeness of a GP, "You're no longer earning money – that makes you unhappy."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! You need a rest. Why don't you go upstairs to bed and have a rest?"

"Yes," I agreed, feeling Victor had precisely the right idea (I didn't think of it at the time, but it *was* what I had been doing before he arrived), "I'll do that."

"Good," said Victor, accompanying me to the foot of the stairs, "I'll let myself out." He oversaw me as I climbed the stairs, quite steadily, and then called: "I'll see you later. I'm off to the pub again."

"Goodbye," I called back, stuttering, "And thank you." Victor let himself out, and I retired to bed.

Rest, I told myself, just rest. I shut my eyes, and tried sleeping. It was in vain: there was another car accident outside. I remember hoping that Victor wasn't involved. Frustrated, I staggered over to the window and peered out. Neither of the cars was Victor's, so I fell back into bed. Why, I thought, in this day and age with all of the technology that was possible, were cars not yet computerised? They had hundreds of satellites orbiting the Earth. And with GPS technology it would be simple to program a car to go wherever you liked, and the driver wouldn't have to lift a finger. Then there would be no crashes whatsoever. Unless, I realised, the system was designed by the wrong company... If the programming was not done properly then accidents like this could be more common than they were now, bringing a whole new meaning to the word 'crash'.

I took a long time getting comfortable. When I closed my eyes, all I could visualise was Zeus Ganymede. It gave me a shiver up my spine. I tossed and turned under the covers, and then realised it was probably too hot to have them in the first place, so I flung them off. After much unrest, I finally made it to sleep.

When I awoke, it was midnight. Rain was falling against the window, but it was still hot, and cars and lorries were still speeding by intermittently. I could not get back to sleep now – I felt as if it were the morning. I climbed drearily downstairs and had a very early breakfast cereal to eat. Afterwards, I decided to catch up on the news and so switched on the television set in the lounge, and selected a news channel. I did not care to hear the reports on the War, or on the twenty-second kidnapped girl this year, or the drunken coach driver that killed thirty people and himself when he drove off a cliff. So I went to the "society" news section.

Bermuda had claimed independence.

Bermuda – independent! How ridiculous! Bermuda may be celebrating, I thought, but myself I found it just stupid. It was in my opinion that countries should be uniting, not separating – the number

of flame wars I'd got into about the European Union was a testimony to this belief, but even I admit that its approach to this unification is bureaucratic and hence counter-productive. Maybe it was dangerous thinking like this that had really cost me my first job. You can't go into government with progressive opinions.

I switched off the television. Much to my surprise, it turned itself back on again. There was a man on the screen. It was a man that I recognised from the back of my mind, but I could not quite put a finger on him, at least, not at this time of the morning. He was standing against a plain grey background, and had straight black hair. He did not make any gestures with his hands, or even with his face.

"We must meet," the man announced. "At four o'clock this morning, you must come to the park in your village. Please make sure you're there; I'm relying on it," and the television set promptly turned itself off. I was lodged firmly into a state of deep confusion. I put the TV back on for a moment, but was only faced with the news channel once again. I typed in various channel numbers, but found nothing of the sort I had just observed. What was going on? Just then, I remembered who the man was.

I turned the TV off again, open mouthed. I would have to go to the park at five o'clock then. Had anyone else seen that man on television? Had Victor? I was in a panicky state, and the darkness of the night did not make it any better. I could not ring Victor now, of course. I would have to wait. It would be hell to wait in this state of not knowing. But then, Victor would no doubt have been asleep at that time. So he wouldn't have seen it anyway. I rang him.

"Hello Victor?" I said quickly, "Did I wake you up?"

"Yes!" Victor answered.

"You haven't been downstairs at night have you?" I asked.

"No! Why?"

"It doesn't matter. Thanks." I hung up. In hindsight, it was a bit of a stupid idea to ring him in the first place, but when you're in such a state of shock you seem instinctively to turn to the help of other people. Somehow, I felt quite certain that nobody else had seen what I had seen just then.

The man on the television was the man that had been following me a couple of days ago, the same man that had spoken to me at the pub for no apparent reason.

Transfixed with fright, in my own home, I could physically do no more than sit and wait, completely overtaken by fear and fatigue.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Miranda – I think I should refer you to a psychiatrist."

"But you have to believe me!"

"Now look. Are you really trying to convince me that while we were having our meeting, part of a ski lift crashed through the ceiling and into the middle of the room?"

"Yes," said Miranda.

"And that two men were on it – one of them in a crazy psychedelic suit?" her boss continued.

"That's right."

"And we don't remember it because the two of them used a little hand-held black machine to erase our memories?"

"Correct."

"But that they didn't erase yours because some freak space portal opened up and an alien celebrity figure happened to be in the neighbourhood, and..."

"The neighbourhood of galaxies," Miranda put in.

"And asked them if they were all right, despite the danger there must have been in getting there?"

"That is correct."

"And you think I should believe you?"

"But it's true! Look, I know it sounds crazy..."

"Of course it sounds crazy. It's a consequence of not being true. And if you don't pull yourself together and get these stupid ideas of space exploration and extraterrestrial visitation out of your head you may well find you and your *unemployed* head somewhere where it'll get shrunk."

Miranda gulped.

"OK. But what about my story of the adviser to the chancellor, who I definitely saw in Paris vanishing into thin air?"

"That is also nonsense."

"It's not."

"You've been going on about it for weeks!"

"It only happened on Monday."

"Days! Weeks! Whatever. You've been nagging and nagging."

"It would be a good chance to bring up the story about his governmental past."

"But that's the thing – it's the *past*. Do you not see that?"

Nobody's interested in it any more! The chancellor has had scores of other advisers since that fellow left."

"Two, sir."

"Whatever. OK – I'll tell you what, we'll have a meeting about it on November 31st. OK? Happy now?"

"But that's ages away!"

"We can drop the whole issue if you want."

"No!" Miranda cried, "No. That's fine. Thank you. But can I get an interview with him beforehand?"

"No – you are to continue with your ordinary work."

"But I'd need to be prepared for the story."

"We haven't decided whether you're going to do it yet."

"I'd need to be prepared for the story that I might do. And for the meeting in which I can present my case."

"Look – you can get an interview with him if you want, but it would be in your own time, without pay."

"But surely if there was some shockingly gossip-gathering scandal he'd been involved in, you'd let me interview him then wouldn't you? Everyone knows that shockingly gossip-gathering scandals – no matter how stupidly trivial – sell papers. Say – if he'd gatecrashed a private A-list stars only party and started singing *La Marseillaise* – you'd let me then wouldn't you?"

"Did he?" the boss exclaimed, slamming his palms onto the desk.

"No!" Miranda said, "It was just hypothetical." The boss slouched back into his leather swivel chair. "But you would if he had would you not?"

"Look – if you could possibly prove that he had been involved in a shockingly gossip-gathering scandal, no matter how stupidly trivial, to hide the fact you want to prepare for the meeting that will prepare for the story that you might write, like somehow gatecrashing a private A-list stars only party and starting to sing *La Marseillaise*, then of course you could have an interview with him; but since he hasn't and since you won't and since you can't, I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

"I don't know – I forgot the plot by the end of the sentence."

"I think the gist is that you would if he had, and I could if there was, but that since he probably hasn't and there probably isn't, you

wouldn't and therefore I can't."

"Miranda," said the boss, leaning forward, "Just go see a psychiatrist. Now."

She got up from her seat, glaring at her boss with malice.

"You'll regret it," she said as she got to the door, "And I'll see you on November 31st."

"I look forward to it," said her boss as she slammed the office door behind her.

"I'll show him," she said aloud when she was out of the room. She made her way towards her own office, and as she turned the handle of the door, a little thought lit up in her mind:

"Just a moment," she said to herself, "there *isn't* a 31st of November."

CHAPTER SIX

It was a quarter to four in the morning. My wait had been a nightmare to endure. What did this man want from me? Was he working for Zeus, gathering information from me? Or was it a thief, or a con man? Was I going to be held for ransom? Was I a fool to be going there in the first place? There were just so many possibilities, and they made me as uncomfortable as a fish out of water. I was trying to prepare myself for the worst, but just ended up fidgeting endlessly with my hands, which had turned clammy in my anxiety. It didn't get me anywhere helpful.

Walking to the park was spookier. I tried to stay cool and collected on the outside, with my hands by my sides, strolling down the pavement; but on the inside I was a paranoid wreck. On a dark morning like this it was quite possible that I could be mugged or even assaulted. I knew I could not really stay at home and forget about the whole thing. I had to face the proverbial music, because if these were villains I was dealing with, then I could conceive of them committing arson on my house or something if I did not comply with their requests. You know, I always thought my life was a bit of a comedy – a dark comedy, that is – but now it seemed suddenly to have turned into a horror movie. Yes – there were the bare trees, the cooing owls, the bumps in the night, the stagnant air, the bare fields – but there were also the purple hedges, the odd delivery truck, the overturned recycling bins, the delayed trains and the glowing 'This village welcomes careful drivers' signs with 'careful' crossed out and 'reckless' written above it. But we all know that the horrors outshine the humour, the bad clouds the good, the evil puts blockades around the happiness and then signposts them with things like 'nothing to see here' and 'beware of the coyote'.

The thoughts made me shudder, and I did not stop shuddering until I reached the park.

I could see the seat I had sat on when I had my encounter with Zeus on the previous day. In the dark, its pinkness was obscured. Behind the seat, looking ominous, was the forest. It was three minutes to five by my watch, which is an hour ahead and one minute slow, losing nine sixteenths of a second every three-quarters of an hour. I was early, so I wandered aimlessly for a while. The darkness still seemed threatening and frightening, despite my eyes having become

attuned to it. I was looking at a large bush on the edge of the park, which obscured any light that may have been coming from the houses on the street beyond. Suddenly I noticed a flickering of light from within it. It got brighter and more pronounced, and I was aware of my adrenaline churning. Then gradually, the flickers became licks of flame, and the bush abruptly caught fire. It made me take a jump back, even though I was quite a distance from it anyway. The burning bush made little sound, but I could clearly see it blaze with infernal energy. Nobody from elsewhere in the town seemed to have noticed. Then, suddenly, from behind the flames, the man stepped out.

We both stood in silence at a considerable distance from each other for many excruciatingly suspenseful minutes. He was not a young man, but somehow his face and posture looked perfect and unblemished. He was wearing what looked like a black gown, but could have been a long leather jacket. He stood next to the bush, staring at me. The flames gradually subsided, until they had gone completely, leaving just wisps of smoke emanating from the bush. I was open-mouthed, once again. The man took a step forward. All the while, his hands were firmly behind his back.

At this point the overall ambience of a horror-film-rip-off was shattered, because the man spoke to me:

"Hello," he said, remarkably confidently, "Oberon Furrow?"

"Yes," I stuttered. I instantly regretted that. Didn't they usually say something ominous like 'I might be'?

"You saw me on television?" the man asked, nearly smiling, but not quite.

"Yes," I answered. He marched a few steps closer.

"Good wasn't it? How I intercepted the broadcasting." Now he was smiling.

"Er..." I stammered. The man did not give me a chance to say any more on that subject.

"I need to ask you a few questions," he said, coming closer still. My heart was now pounding, as if my imminent death had been confirmed already. The man continued: "Could you try to answer 'yes' or 'no' please to the first few questions, including this one?"

"Yes."

The man's voice seemed to echo around the park, which made the experience ever more frightening. Sweating despite the cold, I

listened to the man speak:

"First question: if you timed yourself running from this end of the park to the other, and I timed you also, standing here, would our results be the same? I am assuming this is given that our reaction times are equal, so we start and stop timing correctly."

There was a pause. Quite how weird it felt when he'd asked me that question, I cannot tell you.

"And the question is whether the results would be the same?" I inquired. There was another pause.

"Yes," the man replied.

"Yes they would, in theory," I said. There was another awkward silence.

"Right, next question then," the man continued, "Suppose I threw a ball, and suppose you know precisely its speed, the force with which I threw it, the air resistance, and all of the gravitational influences nearby. Suppose you know everything physical about the situation. Every movement of the atmosphere, every fluctuation in wind speed and temperature and velocity. Could you, in theory, predict where the ball would land, with total accuracy?"

"If I knew everything about it, then I suppose I would - theoretically, yes." The man paused before going on to the third question. It was more like an exam than anything else! But what was the point of it?

"Now would your answer change if you replaced the tennis ball with an electron or a stream of electrons?"

I hesitated momentarily.

"I don't see why it would, no," he answered. Another ominous pause.

"How many dimensions does the Universe have?"

"Well, three." I waited.

"What is the largest planet in this solar system?"

"Er... Jupiter?" Pause again.

"What is the charge of an electron?"

"The charge? Of an electron? I'm not quite sure what you mean." I had probably been taught this at some stage at school, but it was not the sort of thing I remembered.

"Who on this planet discovered the first laws of gravitation?"

"Er... Alb... No, Isaac Newton." There was a final pause.

"Right. Now a short mental mathematics round," he said. He proceeded to present ten mathematical questions to me; they were very difficult, and while some were completely beyond me, I think I may have got others right, though they still took me a few minutes to calculate. But what was I doing having a maths test in the middle of a park?

"That's the end of the questions," he concluded, "the *official* questions, anyway. I would like to ask of you some of the more administrative questions, if that's all right. Now, how is it that people get information in this world? Books, for example, is one, but how else?"

"Where are you from then?" I asked.

"I don't wish to answer personal questions. Please. Humour me."

"Well, there's the Internet of course."

"Ah yes. So everyone has a connection to this Internet?"

"Not *everyone*. But I think most people do nowadays. Some people just don't need it; others can't afford it I suppose."

"Can't what?"

"Afford it," I repeated.

"I see... But how else do they obtain information?"

"Um... Oh, mobile 'phones. They often have small information-requesting services."

"Oh good. Presumably everyone has a mobile 'phone do they?"

"No," I said, "But I'm forgetting television, of course."

"Television, OK. So books, Internet, mobile 'phones and television. Thank you for that. That's the end of the questions then, except to say, can you sign here?" He produced a small electronic device that he held up to me. On the screen were details of my answers to the questions. There was also space to sign at the bottom, and on the side of the device was the logo of Corfizz Universal. The man handed me a special pen, and I signed, quite cautiously.

"Thank you very much," the man said and put the device in his jacket pocket. What was this all about then? Was this man from Corfizz, a secret organisation of some kind? Or was he just mad?

"Could you tell me what you're going to do with the information?" I asked the man. There was quite a long pause. It was beginning to annoy me.

"I cannot tell you that. Now, I must thank you again for completing this survey, but I must now erase your memory. I have others to see."

"Erase my memory?" I exclaimed, quite scared. I took an instinctive step backward. The man took an intimidating step forwards. He took out another device from his pocket. It was a small cubic device, but I could not see any details for it was too dark.

"Yes," he said, "And since you will remember nothing of this, may I take this opportunity to say that your answers to those questions are quite the worst I have ever encountered. Have a nice day."

The man swung the device round to the back of my neck, and I felt pins of some nature sticking into my skin. It did not hurt, but the experience caused a shudder of surprise to rocket down my spine. The man pressed a button on the back of the device, there was a beeping sound, and all went black.

* * *

I awoke the next morning feeling refreshed. It certainly was a good idea of Victor's to rest. I had had such a good sleep that I felt positively full of energy. I got out of bed with confidence and mounted my slippers on my feet.

After breakfast, I decided to put on the computer to write a letter for a prospective new job. I had found another accounting firm further away from town, a place called Yenom. It sounded an interesting place, since Yenom is 'money' backwards. I managed to write my letter quite quickly, partly thanks to having taught myself to touch-type. I printed off the letter twice, because the first copy was, for some reason, off centre. I folded the letter, put it in an envelope, and set off out of the house to the post box which was just outside the park.

As I looked at the park, I recalled that I had experienced some vivid dreams the previous night. But of course, as with most of my dreams, I did not remember them now. I reached the post box, and dropped the letter inside. I was just turning to go back down the street, when I saw, in the corner of my eye, the figure outline of Zeus Ganymede.

I did not know what to do. It did not look as though Zeus had

seen me, but then it was hard to tell from where I was standing. I knew I wanted to find out more about this mysterious character, but I also knew that it could be a very dangerous thing indeed...

"Excuse me," came the frustrated voice of a woman who was standing with her hands on her hips in front of me, "You're blocking the gate to the park!"

"Oh!" I said, and found myself walking backwards through the gate into the park to let the woman in, "Sorry." I looked around, and Zeus was nowhere to be seen. So I thought I would sit down on the pink bench again; after all, there was little else for me to do.

I thought hard about other possible things that I might do in my between-employment time, but I could think of none. Until I had a reply from the accountancy firm, I was sure I would be bored. I leant against the arm rest of the seat, and looked ahead at the now graffiti-ridden half-pipe that I had once seen those skaters using. Suddenly, the arm rest of the seat gave way, and I toppled over, straight into some overgrown nettles. The stinging pain surged through me. As soon as I recovered the strength, I leapt out of them in a messy frenzy. Despite there being so many other people around, quite a number of whom must have seen my fall, nobody came to my assistance...

Except Zeus, who suddenly appeared next to me as if from nowhere, and shocked me so much that I fell into the nettles again.

"Oh I'm terribly sorry!" Zeus apologised, helping me out, "I really am. I'm sorry to have startled you like that. I must get used to foreseeing down here."

What did that mean? I wondered. The pain was quite worse now, and I realised I'd also been stung by a bee at the same time!

"I think..." I said, about to tell Zeus of the bee.

"You've been stung by a bee too," Zeus finished for me, "Could I try something please?" Zeus asked, "I know a good method for healing stings like that."

Between pains, I responded "Yes please." Zeus went straight to my arm, where the sting was, and he touched it gently with two fingers. There was a strange vibration or haziness of the touch - a peculiar sensation unlike anything I had experienced before.

"Could you look away?" Zeus asked, "It's a trade secret." I did so. Inside my arm I felt the same sensation I had as Zeus's touch. It was only for a second, and then the stings had gone completely!

"Wow!" I exclaimed at this miraculous feat. "How did you do it?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"Well thank you so much."

"No problem," said Zeus. "You can look back now."

When I did, I saw that Zeus had vanished.

Looking around the park, it was quite certain that Mister Ganymede was not there. Could he have made a speedy retreat into the forest? I was sure that this was impossible in such a short space of time, and I was sure I hadn't heard the sounds of a person rushing past me, or grass rustling beneath his feet. I checked behind some of the trees of the forest just in case, but found nothing.

I returned home. These events had taken it too far: reading minds and telling the future is one thing; having unexplainable healing powers and being able to vanish at will is quite another. I went directly to my bedroom and lay on the bed. I then had an inspiration. I went on to the computer, and removed the Trojan virus as soon as I was told it had it. I searched for methods of healing bee stings on the Internet.

Of the billions of pages that returned from my query, I only had the patience to look at twelve. None of the methods described involved just the human hand. Most methods were herbal. My suspicion of Zeus became heightened. Who was he really? Whilst I had the Internet working, I tried searching for Corfizz again to see if Zeus had done the web site yet. Nothing. I shut down the computer, but it froze midway through the process so I severed the power. It happened regularly. One just can't expect a computer to turn off when you tell it to turn off; that would be absurd.

It was lunch time now; I had a cucumber and cheese sandwich (one of my favourites). As I sat at the table in the kitchen to eat it, I looked around the room as if it had been the first time I had seen it. I had taken no particular trouble to decorate the room – it was almost bare, its purpose was only as a kitchen and there was nothing more to it. It was also quite dark. Perhaps, I thought, I ought to purchase some decorative items to make the home look a little more comforting. A large clock might be a pleasant idea, or a border to accompany the painted walls.

One of my hobbies is thinking. Naturally it was a particularly unusual hobby, one that I didn't tell anybody about. I usually told

people I enjoyed badminton and posting to web forums. After lunch I sat on the sofa, looking at nothing in particular, just thinking. I would think about such a vast range of different topics and rarely consulted a book for reference. Technology was a good topic for me. I sat and thought about inventions, both sensible and silly, that could be made. I had made no attempt to construct any of them, or even to consider researching them.

I was thinking along the lines of answering machines. I envisaged a similar device for front doors. Ring the doorbell, and if the occupier is out then a message can be left. Maybe there were security implications.

I suddenly remembered the Translator Device. It was right next to me on the sofa. How did it work? It was probably supposed to translate speech into another language, but there were no instructions with it – that was the annoying thing. And what language was the woman speaking when you pressed the button? I reasoned: because there was only one button, the device must have been voice controlled. So I pressed the button. Those incomprehensible words were spoken.

"Help," I commanded firmly, hoping to access some help feature. The woman only replied that shorter phrase, which probably meant something along the lines of 'You cannot do that'.

"How do you use this?" I said, and she said the same thing again. Then I suddenly had a better idea:

"French."

"Merci," said the woman, "Quelle langue désirez-vous parler?" I translated this as: 'what language do you wish to speak?'

"Anglais?" I said.

"Merci."

Now what? Should I say something in French?

"Bonjour," I said, but the word did not come out of my mouth! Instead, it came a fraction of a second later from the device, but in English:

"Hello."

I was so surprised that I nearly dropped the gadget on the floor. The words had come from the device in what sounded precisely like my own voice, but I could not even see a loudspeaker of any kind. I tested the device further by trying to say:

"Quelle langue désirez-vous parler?" and again, the words

came instead from the device in English:

"Which language do you wish to speak?" Of course, I had done it the wrong way around. I should have said English first and then French, so I pressed the button on the device again, assuming it would reset.

"English," I said firmly.

"Thank you," the woman replied, "Into which language would you like to translate?"

"French."

"Thank you."

I took my hands off the device now, just to see what would happen.

"Hello," I said, and the words came from my mouth as usual. Obviously, to be able to influence your speech, certain signals had to be sent up the nervous system, via the hands, so I would have to hold the device as I spoke.

"Hello," I tried saying now:

"Bonjour," the device translated.

"I am going to watch the television," I tried to say, and again, the device said it instead as:

"Je vais regarder la télé."

"Today I met Zeus again."

"Aujourd'hui, j'ai rencontré Zeus encore."

"This device was made by Corfizz Universal," I said, but this time the words came from my mouth in English, even though I was still holding the Translator Device.

"I know it was," said the woman. I was quite surprised.

"Off," I said, thinking this command would be separate from the translation part.

I was wrong.

Maybe you had to hold down the on button or something, I thought. This suspicion was correct.

"Thank you for using Corfizz Universal's Translator Device. Don't forget you can order the touch-less version from your local store, or from our website. Have a nice day – and happy translating."

But what was their website address? Or where exactly was my local store?

I pondered how the device was powered. I examined it all over

and found no place to change batteries, and no other plug holes. It was very unusual. And I resisted the temptation to open it up to examine it, for risk of breaking it.

I had an early night after dinner that evening. I had realised the potential a good sleep could have, and so intended to continue a habit. I dropped off to sleep relatively quickly, all the while thinking of the extraordinary events that had been going on in my life lately. The plot was thickening. But was it too thick to get through chapter seven?

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Listen to music and pay the consequences.'

She hid strategically behind the anti-piracy campaign board. She watched the boss forge ahead, advancing towards a crowd waiting for a bus. She continued, walking stealthily. She looked on as he struggled to get through the crowd.

'Only money buys knowledge. Don't steal facts.'

She hid tactically behind the US intellectual property propaganda. "No," she said to herself, "There mustn't be a confrontation with him. I'll only embarrass myself." She had almost lost sight of him, so she tip-toed towards the bus crowd, and mingled around them until she naturally found herself on the other side. She found her boss watching the traffic, waiting for a moment to cross the road. The bus arrived. There was a big banner on the side of it.

'The green eyes gene is patented. Get a license. Or get a lawyer.'

She hid behind it.

Traffic passed. He couldn't cross. There were no pedestrian crossings around here. There were no bridges, underpasses, overpasses or monorails.

The bus drew away, leaving her exposed. She panicked for a moment, but the boss wasn't looking in her direction. Eventually there was a sufficient break in the traffic flow for the boss to dash across the road. There wouldn't be another chance for a long time. She rushed after him.

Inadvertently she had now ended up right in his path!

No! she thought, Where's the propaganda when you need it?

"Miranda," the boss muttered to her in acknowledgement of her existence, as he walked straight past her. She looked on as he turned into New Street at the corner.

She followed.

So that was the café he went to at lunch breaks. It looked like a grotty old place. Green paint. Small, paved outdoor table area. Not the sort of place into which she cared to follow him. Mr. Furrow's house was further along, so she scampered across the street, and continued on her journey.

Early that morning I had woken to the peaceful sounds of birds singing, to the feeling of freshness and tranquillity in my mind, and the resplendent rays of the sun bursting through the window. As I smiled at this relaxing beginning to the day, the first roars of the rush hour emanated around me. Like beasts rounding up for a stampede, cars were mounting up together on the roads. The bird's singing was drowned out. The fumes spoil the freshness. The sun drifted behind a cloud.

I had cereal for breakfast, all the time troubled by the word 'unemployment', which seemed to form itself all around me in the shapes of domestic items. All of the confusing and incomprehensible encounters that I had experienced piled on top of each other as I realised them with every spoonful of cereal. Zeus Ganymede and his ability to read minds and tell the future flashed through my mind, as I took a spoonful with too many raisins for his liking; his inexplicable healing powers, as I took a spoonful with too much milk; the possibility of his being a stalker, as I took no raisins at all; the mysterious Translator Device, as I chewed on a spoonful with very little milk...

What was going on?

I finished the cereal. I fell down on the sofa. I placed my hands behind my head. I had already had two glasses of water with breakfast, but my mouth was still dry. I got up to see if the post had arrived. Maybe a reply from the accounting business had come. When I opened the front door to look in the porch for the post, I found that there was someone already standing there.

In fact there were two people, who had not had chance to ring the doorbell yet. One was a bald man, with a moustache, thin lips and a stern expression. His suit was incredibly straight, and his shoes were glimmering. Just in likeness of Zeus and the postman yesterday, this man looked quite unrealistic. *Who were these people?* The question was starting to get on my nerves. The other person was a lady, probably the man's wife judging solely by how her arm was linked through his. She was wearing an elegant blue dress, not overly formal, but striking enough. She was smiling, and her hair glittered even with the sun behind the clouds.

A quick glance at the floor where I was standing revealed that there was no mail. I opened the door of the porch.

"Hello," I said.

"Good day," the man answered, with a notable enthusiasm, as though the day really *was* good. "I'm Clive Nelson." It was unusual for strangers to give their name so liberally. "This is my wife Cadence." Well, I had given my own name to Zeus, so who was I to judge? Mr. Nelson spoke in a firm voice that matched his facial expression, neither of which changed throughout the conversation.

"Hello," I said again, "Are you looking for me?" There was a slight pause, Clive putting both of his hands behind his back.

"I'm looking for some transportation," Clive said, "Do you think you could direct me please?"

"Public transport you mean?" I said, "Where do you want to go?"

There was another pause.

"Further up the country," said Cadence in a soft, clear voice.

"The train would be the best option. It would be difficult to get from a rural area like this to somewhere significant by bus."

"Rural?" Clive said, frowning, seeming shocked, "This is urban."

"It used to be rural," I said, "As you must know."

"No other public transport? So this is why the roads are so congested..."

Clive trailed off, and looked pained.

"Are you all right?" I said. Suddenly something clattered to the ground. It was a small something. It was black, and it was cubic. It had come from behind Clive – it was probably what he had been holding behind his back. I recognised it.

"You have a Translator Device?" I said. Clive picked it up and held it. He muttered something in a foreign language, and then pressed the button on the device. I knew that the word Clive was about to utter would be the language that he spoke. When he said it, I heard that it contained sounds I had never encountered before, just like that of the woman on the device I had heard originally. As he said the word, his mouth did not move in sync, and it moved in a uniform pattern as if he were a robot. To the best I could, I transliterated the word as 'Zirthiran', but this may not have been completely accurate. I had never heard of such a language.

"English," Clive then said to the device, "Sorry about that." His

face was now red. "Do you have a device like this?"

"I do. From Corfizz Universal," I said.

"Corfizz?" Clive repeated, "You trade with Corfizz? We thought that..."

"It just came through the post," I qualified my statement, "I'd never heard of Corfizz Universal before it came, you know."

"Oh I see," said Clive.

"Where are you from?" I asked. Before Clive could answer, the postman arrived.

"Hello," he said. It was not the same postman as the one that had delivered the Translator. This postman was far more realistic, though he had vaguely ape-like features.

"Why was there a different postman on Wednesday?" I said to him.

"Was there?" said the postman, "I don't think there was any post for you on Wednesday; I always do the shift around this area." The postman gave a letter to me as he said this.

"Oh," I said, "Right."

"We must be going," Clive said, as the postman did so himself.

"No wait!" I called, as they turned to leave, "What is Corfizz Universal?" Clive sighed.

"You want to know more about Corfizz?" he said, relaxing his stern expression slightly. "Search on the Internet for..."

"No Clive!" Cadence said softly to Clive, tugging his jacket, "Remember what was agreed?" There was a pause again.

"I am afraid I cannot tell you," Clive announced. He turned, and he and his wife left. I remained, still in the proverbial dark, with the letter in my hand. I opened it steadily. Junk mail.

"Hey! Oby!" came a call from the street. I looked up to see a gang of unruly-looking teen-aged boys on skateboards, chewing gum and looking threatening. "Cleaned that graffiti ain't you?"

"Er, yes," I replied, "I have." One of the other people in the skateboard gang laughed. I went back into the house. I was too concerned with these other mysteries to dwell over corrupt decorum. I went to my computer.

"The operating system has detected that it exists. What would you like your computer to do?" came a message on the screen. I was tempted to laugh. It was probably a poorly conceived virus. When I

had got rid of it, I searched on the Internet for 'Zirthiran'. Nothing. I searched for languages of the world, and scrolled down a complete list of them, searching for likely alternative spellings of the word. I found nothing of interest. I searched for Corfizz again. Still nothing.

I was lost. I wandered around the house quite aimlessly, thinking. I could think of nothing more to do than call Victor. This time, regardless of what he thought, I would explain quite adamantly that strange things were going on. I was determined.

"Hello, Victor?" I said after getting through.

"Hello Oberon!"

"I need to speak to you."

"Sure. Go ahead. You mean on the 'phone?"

"Yes that's fine. Some very strange things are going on. Not just the Translator Device. This Zeus Ganymede – he has healing powers too. He cured a bee sting I had with his hands alone! And he vanished. I... I, er, turned around, and he was no longer there! Into thin air it seemed he'd gone. And other people too – lately I've been meeting people who seem so unrealistic, their faces seem computerised. The postman that delivered the Translator was like that..."

"Wait, wait," Victor said, "Slow down. I've said it before and I'll say it again: you are quite stressed because of your job..."

"That's not it!" I shouted, "I'm telling you, Zeus vanished, and he could read my mind and tell the future. I'm not lying. I just met some people at my door called Clive and Cadence Nelson. They also seemed unrealistic, and they spoke in a foreign language I didn't recognise. They had a Corfizz Translator Device too. I heard him say 'Zirthiran' – or something like that – into the device. Don't you believe me?"

"All right," said Victor, "I believe you. But you have to promise. The next time you meet Zeus, or the next time someone unrealistic turns up, a 'Zirthiran' perhaps, you must ring me on your mobile, OK? You maintain the situation and I'll come and investigate as soon as I can. Will you do that?"

"Yes," I said, my voice quieter, "Thank you."

"I'll see you later. And don't forget to rest."

"Goodbye." They hung up.

I walked to the park. I had a feeling I might be able to meet

Zeus there again. When I reached the park, there were many people already there – not just skaters this time. With a quick scan, I established that Zeus was not among them. I sat down on the empty seat by the forest once more. It was turning slightly orange.

The bench was still pink though.

Just a moment – an orange forest? I turned around again.

What orange forest? There was a perfectly ordinary group of trees behind me – brown bark, green leaves, green grass. Deep breaths, I told myself; deep breaths.

Recovering from my stupor, I recognised that some of the skaters fooling around in front of me were the same as the ones that had spoken to me that morning. I writhed in my seat. I wasn't sure who to blame for all this. Was it the education system? Or the influence of the media? The government had been told about these issues but had consistently done nothing.

The government simply 'needed all the money they could for the War'. It was a War 'against terrorism and injustice', they said, that 'had to take place for us all to remain safe in our homes'. The politicians of some influential nations (as well as the UK) – as politicians are famous for – collaborated on a number of other illogical excuses for the whole affair. I was, of course, against the War nonetheless, but again, I, as a mere member of the public, was powerless.

I stopped thinking about such depressing political issues. As I drifted out of this thought, the foul polluted air suddenly met me once again. The skaters in front of me had now begun swearing to excess, arguing, fighting and there was also a boy that had been injured while skating, and was lying on the ground. I knew that if I got involved I would probably end up injured myself, so I did nothing. If the future is in our children, I thought then, good gracious – if unnecessary wars, pollution, congestion and overpriced goods was the state of the world today, with these as our children, what would the world be like in decades to come?

Zeus was still nowhere to be seen. Typical. It was the only time I actually wanted him to be there. Why had I not asked for his e-mail address or something? I stood up, and sighed. I then proceeded to walk back home.

Miranda arrived at the home of Oberon Furrow. She composed herself, combed her shoulder-length hair for the seventeenth time that day, and rang the doorbell of the house. She whispered her rhyme:

"One, two, three, four; give him time to get the door. Five, six, seven, eight; perhaps I've really come too late. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve – he's out."

She began to wander away from the house, but then an unoriginal inspiration struck her. She walked around to the side of the house, where there was a gate to the garden.

"Nice place," she said to herself. "Oh I must stop talking to myself!"

Oberon was coming into the driveway. She pressed herself against the wall, just in case.

He was inside. She crept out from her hiding place, and was just about to press the doorbell again, when she suddenly stopped and looked up at the windows on the first floor. It was beginning to rain. There was a drainpipe running up the side of the house, in the little path to the garden where she had been hiding.

Back in my living room, I had turned on the television. Immediately, a news broadcast appeared:

"Two girls have been found dead..."

I went to the television menu as quickly as possible to avoid having my mood stoop any lower at these depressing issues. I scrolled down the programs. There was now an entire menu section devoted to home improvement programs, one to cooking and one to reality television. I deplore all of these subjects for how boring they are. Though, I did remember the thoughts I had had earlier of decorating the kitchen, but I nonetheless did not wish to watch a home improvement program right now. There were just too many from which to choose.

There also seemed to be a program devoted to live coverage of the War – now why would anyone watch that?

In the entertainment programs I found a new drama series called 'Homicide', and an accompanying series called 'Suicide'. Scanning the program synopses, I found a program about people being

murdered by people that were already dead; a program on a body that was washed to shore and a series of grisly murders that followed; a program about a war; a murder mystery program adapted from a novel; and a Channel 4 documentary on why we're all obsessed with war, death and home improvement.

Having been satisfied that there was nothing of interest to be seen on the television, I turned it off.

The 'phone rang.

"Hello?" I said after picking up the receiver.

"Hello," came a deep and serious voice, "I'm afraid your wife has died."

"You have the wrong number," I informed this man, "I'm not married," thinking I could hear laughter in the background.

"That's all right then," said the man, retaining extremely droll seriousness, "This was a prank call anyway. Goodbye."

I went to bed. I was hot, but it was not hot weather at the moment. I was sweating slightly. The noise of the traffic continued uninterrupted. I tossed and turned in the bed to excess. Horns... people arguing... road rage... rain beginning to fall...

"Troubled, Oberon?" came an echoing voice. It was vaguely familiar. I shot up. The room was empty. The rain continued. The horns continued. The disputes continued. I turned over and put my head beneath a pillow.

"Are you beginning to realise?" came a whisper of the same echoing voice. I took off the pillow and observed the room once more. The noises from outside were becoming unbearable. I went back under the pillow.

"Think..."

What was it? I heard the telephone ringing. Not another prank call I hoped. I picked up the 'phone that was by the bed.

"Oberon, get out," came a panicking voice.

"I'm sorry – who is this?"

"Get out of the bed!" the man shrieked. I did as he said. Whilst on the 'phone, I watched the bed as if there might be some beast inside it.

"Who is this? And..." but I stopped in mid-sentence because just then, the bed vanished.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From the journals of Kiviuq Orion.

I pressed the button. Bodies, and their names, flashed across the screen, rather like one of those *gambling* machines I saw here once – can't remember what they called them. Having cycled through people for a minute or so, it stopped on a middle-aged female of the species going by 'Mary Horton'. She wasn't far away either; I like it when that happens. The light indicated a south-easterly direction, and I followed it.

I must say, I felt the oppression around me. Crossing their roads I felt singularly unsafe, exposed. Nobody – nobody but *nobody* – noticed that I was looking for some place, let alone offer to help me get there, like they do on Curea, Syareo – well, most planets really – I've even known that sort of courtesy from Diputs. At the risk of this document being discovered, I shall omit the specifics and the gory details of my walk. At least the wormhole network would be ready by the time this one was over.

The light stopped flashing when I came to a waiting room at a dentist's. The device beeped. There, on a blue settee, reading a magazine about 'slimming', was Mrs Horton, whose glossy blonde hair almost obscured her figure, and her make-up, pasted onto her so thickly that she might have been a sculpture, had almost obscured her face. There was somebody else in the room – a small man reading a newspaper in the opposite corner. I sat down, and waited for one of them to be called away for their 'appointment' (it seems dental health, if not all medical treatment, is something for which you have to wait, and certainly not something that people can do themselves).

It was a happy stroke of luck that the man was called for his check-up first, leaving Mary and I in the room alone. I closed the door of the waiting room cautiously, and it was only then that she looked up at me.

"Mary Horton?" I said.

She stood up, folding the magazine and stuffing it into an already stuffed handbag.

"It's just a check-up isn't it?" she said, walking towards me. She had obviously thought that I just entered the room, and that I was part of the staff.

"Before you go," I said, "I need to ask a few questions."

"In the waiting room?" said she.

I offered her a chair. She went back to her original seat.

"Now then. How big is this room?" I muttered, "Well, imagine you are out on the street. If you timed yourself running from one end of the street to the next junction, and I timed you with a stopwatch at the midway point, standing still, would our results be the same? You may assume that our reaction times are equal so that we start the timers simultaneously."

"I'm sorry," she said, "I was... who are you? What has this to do with teeth?"

"You want it teeth-related? All right, imagine you start from the dentist's."

"But I..."

"Please – answer yes or no."

"Well, of course they would, but look – I have an appointment; am I getting a check-up or what?"

Humans are evidently not trained to cope with situations that are even the slightest bit out of the ordinary. I bet they start worrying when their favourite brand of marmalade is discontinued.

"Suppose I threw a ball," I continued, and, noticing her objection, I said "let me finish. Suppose you know *precisely* its speed, the force with which I threw it, the air resistance, and all of the gravitational influences nearby. Suppose you know everything physical about the situation: every current in the atmosphere, every fluctuation in wind speed and temperature and velocity and so on. Could you, in theory, predict where the ball would land, with total accuracy?"

"I'm getting out of here," she said, heading for the door. I restrained her.

"And so you may, when we have finished the questions."

It was perhaps a miracle that we managed to get through them all, and perhaps also a miracle that she got one right. No – I am being too mean. Well, I'm sure it isn't her fault that she knows so little of how the world works at a fundamental level, but at least people here can appreciate those who do study it (the Isaac Newton question being the one on which she succeeded). As for the mathematical part of the test, well, I have seen Pyrearian weasels perform better.

She struggled when I erased her memory. Kicked me in the

Justin Morgan

shin, even. Maybe I should have expected it.

CHAPTER NINE

I dropped the receiver. With open mouth, and eyes on stalks, I stared at the space where my bed used to be, now oblivious to the sounds of the rain, and the road rage, and the traffic, that was still emerging from the outside, although I was distantly aware of a scream and a thud from outside the window. Then I suddenly panicked. I put the receiver back up to my ear, but there was nothing but an engaged tone.

"Victor," I whispered, "Ring Victor." I began dialling the number at once, but then... the bed reappeared. "What?!" I exclaimed in bewilderment, jumping backwards in shock. The bed was looking quite innocent. I approached the piece of furniture as if it were a deadly animal that may lunge for me at any moment. I touched the duvet. Normal. I rushed downstairs. The television was still on.

"A bomb has been dropped on London by the army of the opposition, destroying a website design company's headquarters and killing..." I switched off the television and threw the remote control onto the sofa. A web design company? Was this where Zeus was working? No - it was just a coincidence, and my thoughts suddenly became muddled. I looked left. I looked right. What was I doing? What should I do?

The rain was pounding harder. There was still congestion on the roads. But I could not stay in here, despite its dryness. I frowned and walked quickly about the house aimlessly. Were the laws of physics beginning to slacken, allowing beds to vanish?! I put on my coat and brought the hood over my head. I then remembered I had an umbrella, and I put this over my head too, before proceeding rather clumsily out of the front door, into the torrents of rainfall and the ear-shattering cacophony of the cars.

There was no point in driving away, obviously. I quick-marched down the street, passing the garage and the abandoned bus stations. I was looking almost exclusively at the ground as I walked, although this was not a particularly pleasant thing to do because of the abundance of litter. I passed no other people on the path. Eventually I reached the edge of town and turned to the pavement next to the dual carriageway. Traffic was moving now. I continued.

Halfway down the road, quite exhausted, I stopped. I had not been used to doing so much fast walking. I really disliked physical activity, and would not have regarded myself as fit (but body, as far as

I know, *is* stable). A car pulled into the lay-by next to where I was standing. With a glance out of the corner of my eye, I saw that I actually recognised this vehicle.

Victor got out of the car and approached me. He did not have a coat, but was holding an umbrella quite loosely above him and letting it sway from side to side without caring.

"Oberon!" he said, and we naturally found ourselves walking back to Victor's car together, "What are you doing?"

"Taking a walk," I said, and under my breath, "trying to get away from it all."

"I was just going into town," Victor announced as he got back into the driver's seat. He gestured to the passenger seat, indicating for me to sit down. I could not refuse. "Do you want to come?"

"Er, thanks. Yes."

Victor drove further on down the road towards the shopping centre of town. Neither of us spoke. The windscreen wipers were doing overtime. Nearer the town centre, the traffic mounted. Victor found his way through a number of back-streets and suburbs to get to a car park. There was just one space left, and it was four euros per hour to park. We got out.

The rain tapered off and stopped, but it was still quite cold. Was not the weather so changeable nowadays! I followed Victor through the streets. These shopping streets were always crowded and today was no exception. I tried to block out the chatter from the people I passed; I also tried to exhale more than I did inhale in to avoid passive smoking. Victor turned left into a small bookshop.

"Cindy wants me to get a cooking book," Victor explained. I nodded. (Cindy and Victor had married two years ago; I had been the best man. I recalled such memories fondly, although now they seemed very distant and almost unreal, especially compared to the world of mysteries surrounding and perplexing me today).

When Victor had the book he wanted, we left the shop to a now more crowded street. I was suddenly aware that I was hungry. But we pressed on down the path. I brushed past somebody in a lilac anorak, and almost tripped over someone's dog. Taxis and vans seemed to be passing quite frequently.

"Why are you frowning Oberon?" Victor said, who had turned his head round momentarily to check that I was still behind. "Are you

worried about something?"

"It's... I'm hungry," I answered.

"We'll get a pasty from that cake shop in a moment. Is that OK?"

"Yes. Fine thanks."

Dark clouds were looming ominously above the high street. I readied my umbrella, but Victor turned into a hardware store. I almost missed this, but I saw it in my peripheral vision at the last second and followed him inside.

"Batteries..." Victor murmured as he picked up a pack of AA batteries and transferred them straight to the counter. When he had paid, we left again, and went around the corner of the street.

"The pasty shop's in the precinct isn't it?" said Victor as he approached the door to it, "Oh just a moment. I forgot the other thing. I won't be a moment." He went back around the corner.

I was left to stand next to the entrance to a clothes shop. There were people going in and out constantly, putting me at unease. Some of the people found themselves clashing at the doorway and neither would let the other pass. Quite a palaver. Then, after I had scanned the skies for signs of rain again, I saw someone... yes, it was him!

"Zeus?" I called. He was heading for the precinct. I followed with a spring-like rapidity, but I accidentally stepped on a discarded can that was lying on the ground, and rolled over onto the road.

I managed to pick myself up unharmed. Hordes of people were going in and out of the precinct's doors, and I could make out the figures of neither Victor nor Zeus either way. I headed for the building, and rushed forth to the doors but collided with a woman with four shopping bags.

"Sorry," I said quickly, noting that she had not dropped a bag, but she did look at me with squinted evil eyes. I dashed on through the doors of the precinct. The people were more dispersed, but I still could not see Zeus there. As I walked I looked into the shop windows to see if he was there. No luck for the first few strides.

Then, just after passing the pasty shop, I saw the back of Zeus's head in a crowd. I was quite sure it was him. He was noticeably taller than the people around him. I ran towards the crowd to get to him. The noise was getting louder. I kept going, breaking into a run, eyes fixed on Zeus.

"Zeus!" I called again. He was walking fast ahead of me; we were separated by many crowds of people. "Zeus!"

I kept jogging, out of breath and hot, until the last outlines of Zeus had disappeared completely into the masses of people in the precinct.

Miranda found herself staring at the clouds.

It was wet. Very wet. She felt the cold and damp permeating her clothes. Her wooziness gradually subsided, and she cast her head from side to side. She found herself lying down on a driveway, a broken drainpipe hanging loosely above her. Slowly she lifted herself up, and the memories came back. Oberon's driveway – Oberon Furrow. Drainpipe. Climbing. Window. Telephone. Bed. No bed.

She collapsed.

Thirty seconds passed. She sat bolt upright. Clinging to the sagging drainpipe for support, she pulled herself up, took a furtive glance at the window, and then ran away down the road.

She turned into New Street and went directly to the café. Yes – very grotty it was: dark green interior; grotesque wooden panels; dirty tables; clashing orange carpet, stained as a criminal record; potent smell of smoke mixing with even more potent smell of junk curries. She approached the boss's table.

"Quick," she said, "You have to come and look. Something incredible has just happened."

"Ignore her," he muttered under his breath to the gentleman with whom he was dining.

"Seriously! I went to his house and I saw him make the bed vanish with his mind. He just stared at it, and – and..."

The boss stood up.

"Look," he said quietly, "Can you not see I am having a very important meeting? This is the story we've been after for months – and if you..."

"Well this is the story that *I*'ve been after for months! I swear – I was looking through the bedroom window, clinging to the drainpipe, and I saw it with my own eyes..."

"What in Hell's name were you doing clinging to his drainpipe? That is *not* the way we formulate our articles!"

"Oh, I don't know," said the man the boss was meeting, "Certain things nowadays aren't as strange as they used to be. I knew a journalist that climbed down a chimney just to install a microphone in a plant pot."

"Exactly," said Miranda.

"I think you should embrace bold new tactics," he continued.

"Well of course," said the boss, "We're not old-fashioned by any standards. No – I had briefed her to do that. You've done well Miranda."

"Then why were you cross when she told you?"

"Well, you know these eavesdropping café-goers; they'll be shocked if they hear that the journalists aren't shocked when they hear of such practices."

"I'm not shocked."

"We've established that."

"And I've established that Oberon has some sort of magic ability!" said Miranda, perhaps a little too loudly.

"Shhh!" the boss said, pushing Miranda further from the table, "Now, look, if you interrupt my meeting to give some crazy allegations of accountants that are in league with the occult just one more time – one more time, Miranda! - then you will be fired on the spot; do you understand me?"

"What's that you're saying?" said the man at the table, quite rudely.

"I was just asking her to take a photograph of what she had discovered."

"Very wise," he answered.

"Thank you," said Miranda, "I'll do that." And with that, she stormed out of the building, camera in hand.

Victor was driving Oberon home. He was staring out of the window, his hand firmly stuck on my forehead, and his elbow resting on the car's interior arm rest.

"If you saw him why didn't you ring?" Victor was saying, "As we agreed?"

"He was walking away," he said, "I had to catch up with him. And I tripped on some litter."

They did not speak for the rest of the journey.

"Thanks for the lift," he said, as they pulled into the space on his driveway.

"No problem. Now remember: have a good rest, and call me if Zeus shows up anywhere, OK?"

"Agreed," and they went our separate ways. They had had a pasty for lunch in the end, and it was now approaching three o'clock. As Oberon was about to enter the house, he suddenly spotted Clive and Cadence Nelson walk past it in the reflection on the porch window. He had an impulse, and put the house keys back in his pocket. He walked out in to the street and looked down to see the couple walking with quite a quick stride.

He decided to follow them. He walked discreetly down the street towards them, not going too fast. They stopped still for a moment. He did likewise. Clive began looking around him, as though he suspected something. Oberon hastily made it behind a national security propaganda campaign board (*'Don't worry. We're watching over you. All the time'*). After a few moments, they continued to walk along the pavement. Oberon continued to follow.

Further down, Miranda could see Oberon's activity, and she tried inconspicuously to monitor his every move.

Strangely, the Nelsons turned left into a back-alley that Oberon knew led to a dead end. Did they have a back entrance to a B&B there or something? He kept going, and turned left when he reached the same turning. He stopped. His heart was beating fast again as the couple walked further towards the wall at the back. Staring so hard, he didn't notice Miranda, who was observing from a nearby forsythia bush.

It got to the point where the Nelsons had passed all of the possible doors they could go through. What were they going to do now? Go through the wall?! Oberon laughed at the thought. Miranda did not even consider it.

But that's exactly what they did.

Oberon almost lost his footing and fell over. He took a cautious step into the alley. Looking at the wall, he saw that there was a strange elliptical disc suspended a little way up it, as if it was a cut-away through the brick. Through the disc Oberon could see that Clive and Cadence were not there, but there was some sort of vehicle on the

other side.

It was not the sort of vehicle he was used to seeing. It was far larger, more as if it were an entire room on wheels. It was silver, it had no exhaust pipe, and it looked as if there was a complex computer system inside, but Oberon could not make out any other details. He took another step forward.

Miranda also stayed to look at it. But not for long. She quickly darted away, back the way she had come, and straight into the café in New Street.

The disc got smaller. It became gradually smaller and smaller until it was nothing more than a pin-prick of a dot. And then it vanished.

Oberon rushed down to the wall and felt about where the disc had been. But it was an ordinary wall. Just a wall. Had he imagined something? He dashed back home and went inside with haste. He seemed to be having palpitations of some kind. He let out a deep sigh, and fell down onto the sofa. Forget it, he told himself. Don't think of it. Take your mind of it with other things.

Miranda's approach was an entirely different one. As soon as she was in the café, she went straight to her boss's table and dragged him to his feet.

"You've *got* to come and see this."

He let himself free from her grasp. "What *are* you doing?" he shouted. Oddly, no attraction was drawn to him from other customers.

"This really proves my case," said Miranda. She turned to the man at the table, "Excuse us a moment. It's time for my boss to be proved wrong." She summoned him out of the café, at to her amazement, he followed, but he retained a look on his face of such fury that a ravenous hyena might have hurried away in fright.

"Remember what I said," he scowled, "if this is just a..."

"This," she answered, "is serious."

She escorted him down the road. They didn't say a word. When she reached the turning to the alleyway, she stopped dead.

"There," she said in a low voice, "Take a peek." She gestured to the turning with her arm. The boss, still in a state of bewilderment, took a step forward, and looked down the alley. "Now what do you have to say?" said Miranda.

Slowly, he took a step back, turned around, and looked harshly at Miranda.

"You're fired," he said.

Of course, Oberon did not want to watch television. He did not want to use the computer either. He was neither hungry nor thirsty. What would he do to forget about everything?

He got out the 'phone book from the side cupboard in the lounge. He flicked to the G's and tried locating 'Ganymede'. There was nobody with that name in the county. He then tried 'Nelson', remembering this was the surname of Clive and Cadence. It seemed like ages ago now that they had come to his door in the morning. There were Nelsons in the area, but no C Nelsons. Oberon put the book away and slouched down on the settee, not knowing what to do with himself or what to think of any of the mysterious events of the past few days.

For his dinner he had chicken, which had been genetically modified to change colour when it had been cooked for enough time in the microwave (Ordinary chickens were nigh illegal because the chickens with the patented gene modifications had cross-bred in such numbers). While eating, Oberon thought about the times he had spent with Victor, and about whether he might become employed again, and he made a noticeable effort not to think of any of the new mysteries, the ones that shattered common sense.

Soon enough the time came when he felt mentally exhausted, and he retired to bed. Time was a funny thing, he thought. It never stopped, went too quickly for you to think or act, and pulled you in just one direction inexorably, with no stations to get off at and seemingly no choice of destination. And what was time? Such a philosophical question had been plaguing the human mind for centuries, no doubt, and it was just as much a mystery now as then. The thought began to make his head hurt, so he concentrated on sleeping, if indeed such a thing is possible.

An infinite rocky black ravine pulsated and whirled in front of his eyes. He was falling. He was falling without being able to stop - into the inky depths below, into the unknown. But then he saw a face... Zeus's face. Zeus was holding a cubic device out in front of him, as though offering it, but Oberon was falling, not receiving it. The face

faded away, but Oberon kept falling and falling...

"Corfizz Universal..." somebody whispered in the ravine. Was Oberon not alone?

"The largest planet," said another voice, "in the Solar System... is Jupiter... its name: from the Roman God of all Gods, and the Greek equivalent... is Zeus... Jupiter has over sixty moons, and the largest of these is Ganymede... is Ganymede... Zeus Ganymede..."

The ravine whirled around, changing colour a few times, always dark colours. A new face appeared, that Oberon did not recognise. It was hazy, very hazy, very hazy indeed...

"And what chaos can be provoked herein, in the hands of a Nyctobadian?"

The whispers echoed around the ravine infinitely, infinitely downwards with Oberon; falling, falling, and falling until the final crash to the ground.

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning I was not as refreshed as I had been in past mornings, but enough to be feeling vaguely sane. Rest assured, that feeling was quickly shattered. When I opened the kitchen cupboard to remove a teabag from the tea caddy in which I kept them, I found that the tea caddy was already on the kitchen workbench. I then opened the cupboard to get out a mug for some tea, but a mug was already out next to the tea caddy. I didn't remember putting any of that there, but I didn't let it bother me at first. As I was about to fill up the kettle with filtered water, I noticed that it was already full to the brim. Odd.

After finishing my tea, I took my jacket from the peg in my hall and went outside for a walk. I strolled around the village, and sat for a while in the park. There was a breeze, and dark clouds in the sky. With the possibility of rain, I soon made my way back home, and hung the jacket on the peg. It fell off.

I put the jacket back on the peg, and went upstairs to the bedroom to read a book. At the top of the stairs I heard the jacket falling off the peg again. I sighed, and proceeded to read the science fiction story. Science fiction was more or less the only type of book I cared to read – I don't know why. I had never been particularly good at science in my days at school. But that was all over now.

After a good relaxing hour or so of reading, I browsed the Internet for a while, which killed the remaining time to lunch. Although the day had not been without its unusual quirks like when I was making tea in the morning, it had mostly been a mystery-free time so far. I had not met Zeus, or the Nelsons, or any other strangers with mystical powers. I smiled to myself as I ate my cucumber and cheese sandwich.

After lunch, the 'phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Zeus here," came Zeus's voice. My muscles became tense. I stammered.

"Hello..."

"How are you?" Zeus asked confidently.

"Fine thanks. And, er, and you?" I stuttered.

"Very good thank you. Listen, may I visit you at your house please? I'd like to speak to you."

"Yes, sure, or... why can't I come to yours?"

"That wouldn't be such a good idea. Thanks. I'll see you soon." He hung up before I could say anything else. The telephone number was withheld. But Zeus didn't know where my house was! (Neither did he know my telephone number in the first place!)

The doorbell rang. I went to it, frowning. I had done a lot of frowning that week, I thought to myself. When the door opened, Zeus stepped inside the house almost immediately.

"Zeus!" I exclaimed, closing the door and following him into the sitting room, "How did you get here so quickly? How did you know... where to come?"

Zeus looked at me for a few seconds. He gestured to the settee.

"May we sit down?" he said. We did.

"I heard about the bombing of a web design firm in London," I said.

"Did you? How awful." Zeus was looking all around him, not nervously, and not impolitely. He was constantly turning his head in every direction without losing any energy at all. It was starting to make me somewhat dizzy and I had to look away momentarily.

"Would you..." I started.

"Yes please," said Zeus.

"Yes to what?"

"I would like a cup of coffee. That's what you were going to say wasn't it?"

"Er, yes it was," I said, feeling uneasy, "I'll go and make it." I went to the kitchen and did just that. What did Zeus want and how did he find my house? I would have to ask these questions. I would regret it if I did not. I went back into the lounge and handed Zeus his coffee.

"I suppose you're wondering how I found your house," said Zeus, "and what I wish to discuss."

"Yes I am, actually." I was beginning to feel faint with all of this apparent mind-reading. Zeus did not answer his own supposition.

"So what are your hobbies?" Zeus remained incredibly calm, and crossed his legs. "Oh that's interesting."

"You didn't give me chance to answer."

"Oh no. I didn't. I forget you are a bit behind. What do you think of... computers?"

"Er, well..."

"Not very good is it? Computers should be based on quantum

physics instead of classical physics. It makes them infinitely faster you know – I've tried them."

"Where do they use them?"

"Yes. So what have you been doing lately?" Zeus said.

"You didn't answer the question."

"Did I not? Oh well. What have you been doing lately?"

"This and that."

"Is it interesting?"

"Er, not really. I'm trying to... I'm trying to find a new job.

Now, how did you find my house, and how come you arrived so quickly?"

Zeus touched the sofa he was sitting on as if he had never felt such fabric before. "Hmmm. I found it in the... in the book."

"Oh I see. Of course, yes. Why is it then—?"

"How's Victor?" I was getting stomach pains now.

"He's fine. But wait – how did you know about him?"

"Victor? He's also in the book," Zeus said calmly. My stomach was aching so much that I was writhing quite uncomfortably in my seat.

"How did you know he was a friend of mine?"

"That was lovely coffee."

"You haven't had any of it yet," I pointed out. Zeus stared at me, and then showed me his empty mug. My eyes widened and my jaw instinctively dropped.

"I had it whilst you were out of the room."

"But that's when I was making it!"

"Do you want me to... do you want a tablet for that stomach ache?"

I did not reply. I had been transfixed by the empty mug. I was quite certain Zeus hadn't taken even one sip.

"I said you might want a tablet for that stomach ache."

"What?" I said, "My stomach ache? How did you know I had a stomach ache? You're absolutely right."

"I can see," Zeus said as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"See my stomach?" Zeus stared at me again.

"Go and get yourself a tablet." I did. In fact, I had two. When I returned, I found Zeus with his hand *through* the fabric of the sofa. He

removed it swiftly.

"How did you...?"

Zeus sighed. "Have you finished your coffee?"

"Not yet," I replied.

Zeus stood up. "I'll take my cup out into the kitchen," and he outstretched the arm with the cup in it and let go. I panicked slightly, and attempted to retrieve the cup in its descent. But there was no descent. Instead, the cup was floating in the air. It flew quite gracefully into the hallway and then into the kitchen.

"You're a magician are you?" I found myself asking, shaking.

"Well..." said Zeus, waving a hand in the direction of the curtains. They shut themselves. I leapt back in shock. Zeus pointed at the light bulb above them on the ceiling. It switched itself off. He clicked his fingers and the light went on again, and then in quick succession he pointed back at the curtains and they drew themselves. "One dabbles," he concluded.

"How..." I stuttered.

He gestured for me to sit down, and we did. Then he put his hand above the sofa, and slowly moved it downward. When it reached the sofa, he pushed it straight through: no tears, no rips. He allowed me to examine it so that I could see there were no mirrors or special equipment. What was going on? Zeus couldn't really be *just* a magician in his spare time could he? I had already seen a bed disappear; someone putting their hand straight through a solid barrier is equally strange and disturbing. No – higher forces were at work here. I was prepared for drastic explanations.

"Were you the one on the 'phone that told me to get out of my bed?" I said, "Before it disappeared?"

"Yes," Zeus answered. "Another of my tricks. Now sit back, make yourself comfortable, and I'll tell you everything."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

From the journals of Kiviuq Orion.

My next journey took me to a place called Rome, where I was to meet Alberto Novelli. The wormhole network back in business, it would be no trouble to reach my destination, surely.

I was wrong about that. *Getting* there was the easy part; it was finding somewhere from which I could create the wormhole that was the tricky bit. After the incident with Mary, the waiting room at the dentist's became quite crowded again, as though on cue. I walked through the streets, looking into shops, peering through the windows on all sorts of buildings, and glancing down alleyways, but they were all either too crowded, or they were locked, or gangs of people were periodically walking in and out of them.

I surveyed the landscape from just outside the centre of town, and I began to head for the nearest forest. This trek led me to a park. I stopped for a moment. It was the very park in which I had met my first target. The area looked ordinary enough, as far as this place was ordinary in the first place, so the fear that somebody may have seen my exploits, especially with the burning bush, was happily allayed. I stood with idle curiosity for a while. Ahead was some form of adventure playground for children. Three toddlers were there, sliding down metal slopes, and experimenting with the gravitational effects of a swinging seat, held by chains to a metal beam.

To my left was a group of adolescent humans, gathered around a symmetrical metal slope – that is, the gradient on one side matched the reflected gradient on the other. It was called a half-pipe, I believe. Their activity was rooted in the use of small wooden planks, fitted with wheels on their underside. By standing on the planks they found that they could move down land gradients faster and with less effort than by using their locomotive limbs, and further, that they could use the momentum and kinetic energy of a steep descent, such as one down one side of the half-pipe, to instigate a subsequent ascent, or to execute some other acrobatic performance that was, however aesthetic, almost dangerous.

I looked again. I looked from the children (who were with their parents or parent) to the adolescents, and gauged that, in actuality, the latter had not advanced very much further in their pursuits of recreation than the children. Still, what was of course more of a shock

was the very clear segregation. The children were not interested in their elders and likewise the teens were uninterested in the children, and acted as though the other party did not exist. Well, yes, it was an isolated observation. I clung, and still cling, to the knowledge that human neurology is somewhat more diverse than that of a Zirthiran.

I turned around.

I checked myself. It wasn't... well, it must have been... the bench, the very bench – the very *pink* bench whose purpose had brought me to this place in the first instance. I approached it cautiously, then chuckled slightly, and then examined it. Perhaps he that had brought me here was not far away. I looked around the park again, as though thinking about him might summon him there, but it was not to be. I had work to do. So I strode onward into the forest, and, having lost myself amongst the trees, I called upon my means of escape.

The Corfizz Hyperspatial Summoning worked even here on Earth! I was impressed.

I entered the co-ordinates, and stepped through the resulting wormhole, which closed quickly behind me. I found myself looking at something of an architectural monstrosity. An incomplete, ruined stone ring. In my regard for the social interaction of these people, and in grimacing at this befallen structure, I had forgotten to reset the Translator Device (there was a different language spoken in this area), but no-one seemed to notice when I did it.

I will spare the details of my trip to Alberto's residence, and of his responses; it must be becoming monotonous to read, although it was far from monotonous to experience for myself. In the test, the man did better than Mary had done, managing three correct responses in general knowledge; two in mathematics. He seemed convinced that my devices – the Translator, the Conterrogator and the Memory Eraser – were bombs, and that I were some sort of 'terrorist'. It was this fear, I believe, that made it so easy for me to get responses from him, though I repeatedly assured him that I was not there to hurt him, or to hurt anybody for that matter.

I gave him a drink of water before erasing his memory. I had never before imagined a world where one is considered a terrorist, or an evil-doer, as a precedent to being trusted.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Every single movement is being watched. Every single action, every single thought, and every single word is being observed. It is all being watched, and the watcher is not among it, as though you might travel into the far reaches of space and discover him, alone in a giant fortress with an ultra-powerful telescope; he is beyond space itself. No being knows of his presence. No being can understand him. The watcher knows this. He knows this, for he knows everything. No secret is hidden. No thought safe. Nothing is private in his eyes and nothing can ever escape his notice. He doesn't do it just for fun, or just to boast about it, for ordinarily there is no one with whom to boast; he has a... *peculiar* interest in it – that is, in beings that are not as well... informed as he.

"The watcher has decided to visit somewhere within the expanse from which he is invariably so removed. But where? There are so many worlds, so many possible futures, so much time... Of course, he can visit all of them simultaneously, but this would not give the desired effect. Real pleasure would come from careful scrutiny of one area in very subtle ways. Indeed, he would have to *become* one of them. He could disguise; of course he could. He decided to pick the *most* primitive world first. That would produce the most interesting results for sure. No doubt research was necessary, however. And what better way than to befriend one of them? That person would be his contact - his link to a lesser world.

"The watcher chose you, Oberon. He chose you for his research."

Transfixed, open mouthed, oblivious to everything else going on around me, I stared at Zeus Ganymede in front of me on my sofa. "Is this a joke?" I gasped, barely audible.

"It is serious. It is serious, for *I am the watcher*. I have an omnipresence akin to what you might have come to associate with the word 'God'."

"You are God?"

I wanted to believe this was a joke, that it was all nonsense, or a dream of some kind, or a fantasy. But Zeus had already made his talents quite evident, and they were enough to convince anyone.

"No," he said, "Just an alien. Just an alien with a number of godly powers. I know you are convinced already; but let me convince

you some more." He stood up. I watched him intently. "You've already experienced this old trick." Zeus proceeded to vanish. After a second or two, he reappeared in the same place. I was leaning right back in my seat, unable to move anywhere else, "But I can also do this—" and he disappeared from where he was standing and reappeared in front of the window.

I was still not quite sure that I was seeing this. The sensation made me shiver. But I *knew* I wasn't dreaming – I just knew it.

"You're not dreaming," Zeus confirmed and then continued to walk straight through the sofa and even partially through the wall as he said the next bit: "You can understand how hard it has been for me to get used to the way you do things down here."

"How do you do it?" I said desperately, Zeus standing normally in the centre of the room again. Nothing was quite so powerful at shocking me as what happened next though. Another Zeus Ganymede appeared from nowhere by the door and walked next to the other Zeus.

"This is a clue," said Zeus the first. The second Zeus vanished with a wave. A box appeared in Zeus's hand. It was the box that the Corfizz Translator Device came in. I was gasping for breath at the sights he had seen. They were defying physics surely?

"What..." but I could say no more. Zeus carried on:

"Think of a number." I thought of seventy-four. "Seventy-four."

"But..." I said feebly. The box on Zeus's palm disappeared. He sat down again.

"You're wondering what the secret is, aren't you?" said Zeus. I was shivering now. "Don't be scared. Just answer this question: how many dimensions make up the universe?"

"Dimensions?" I repeated, and I had to pause every so often to catch my breath, "Three. Length. Breadth. Depth."

"No. That is a surprising answer. Even your own physicists know there are at least four dimensions, and even that's wrong. There are at least ten. You can only see three of them, yes, but that doesn't mean to say that the others don't exist. I do not ordinarily have that disadvantage. I can live in all ten.

"You can't see the other spatial dimensions that I exist in for I have disguised myself. This is a four-dimensional cross-section of me

that I developed especially for my journey." There was a pause.

"You are ten dimensional? Ten dimensions?" Literally it was impossible for me to take it in all at once. I shook my head and managed to say softly "no".

"It is true. It may look as though I am just a very good magician. But, yes, ten dimensional people have these marvellous abilities when they enter your world."

"This can't be real," I said, "This must be a dream. What *is* the tenth dimension? Where is it?"

"You are not dreaming," Zeus shouted. In a fraction of a second Zeus transformed himself. His body pulsated outwards and morphed, in a grotesque jaw-dropping fashion, into a ghostly black-hooded cloak. This was pitch black, a solid unchanging black that could not ever hope to be made by mankind. Within the cloak was no body.

I screamed.

In a loud booming voice that echoed around me, Zeus, or the creature standing in front of me, announced: "This is not a dream. In a matter of days you will find yourself fully believing what I say. You will even be taken through the tenth dimension yourself. So start believing it now and save time."

Quickly Zeus transformed himself back into his usual body, and I was still staring from the sofa, quivering before the events that were changing my life forever.

"So it's real," I whispered.

"Indeed," replied the god, "It's not magic though. It's science."

In silence, I took my time in composing myself before I spoke again.

"But I have a question," I said.

"Do you want to say it or can I answer it first?"

"I'd really prefer to say it first. I've seen other people that look computerised and unrealistic. There was a man called Clive Nelson, with his wife, that turned up at my door the other day, for example. Are they ten dimensional too?"

"No," said Zeus, "They are not ten dimensional. They are the same as you."

"So why did they look so robotic? He was using a Corfizz Translator Device too."

"Try working it out for yourself." I thought hard, but my brain was not working at its best because of the sheer shock. "I shall tell you," said Zeus, "They are from another planet. It's all to do with the Corfizz Perception Engine you see..."

I don't this information was getting through to me. I was still getting over the beginning: Zeus Ganymede, who was standing in my house, was a ten dimensional god who could read minds, tell the future, penetrate boundaries and make objects and people disappear and reappear at will? And there were people from other planets roaming about Earth? Questions were going through my mind constantly. What was Corfizz Universal? Who were these other races of people (was it Zirthiran?) and were they more advanced than Earth? Why was Zeus here anyway, and why did he pick me? Why were the extra-terrestrials here, and what was that suspended disc I had seen in the alley?

"I know what's going through your mind right now," said Zeus. "For one thing you'd like to know why I chose *you* specifically."

"And? Why? Why me of all people when I'm just an average everyday citizen of such a small place?"

"It's precisely because you're so ordinary that you are perfect." I can't tell you how inadequate that made me feel. But I knew better than to argue. "Well, then I saw you at the pub some days ago after following you in the guise of a jackdaw. I overheard a few conversations about how intelligent and well educated you were. About how you were an accountant and an adviser to the chancellor, that you spoke conversational German and studied finance. I still can't get over the fact that these events happened one after the other... it's so strange to me... that's why I came here. I call it recreational research."

"What about Corfizz? Is it a secret organisation? Do you really work for them?"

"I don't work for anybody. Ten dimensional people are never born and will never die. Corfizz is a Zirthiran organisation of extreme knowledge, and hence power."

"So they are a more advanced civilisation?"

"On the scale of civilisation classification, Zirth is type seven."

"What's Earth on that scale?"

"Type zero."

"Oh dear."

"Indeed," said Zeus and continued to explain: "When Clive Nelson almost told you a search query on the Internet, he was referring to a site that a group of Zirthirans made, some people who were of the belief that Earth should be let into all of these secrets. Nobody on Earth has yet found that site and... We'll come back to that."

"I'm here, as I said, because I want to research you. In fact, I want to be like you. You see, in the tenth dimension there is no concept of time or space. There is no concept of past or future, up or down, left or right. Where I come from, all space and time happens simultaneously. I can see all that there is to see in the future and in the past, and I can see all of the possible futures and pasts, everywhere in the universe when I am in the tenth dimension. Posing as having just four dimensions though, I can experience time and space from a first person view. No longer is everything already done for me. Here, I can savour events. They can *last*. I can learn in a way I never thought possible. For once, my powers are limited, and I have *real* challenges."

I still felt as though I were dreaming all of this. Was I really the first person to see, and to speak to, a god?

"First human, yes," said Zeus.

My heart was drumming fast, and I barely knew what to say or do next, or what was to happen in the future. Zeus knew. It was almost like having a genie sitting next to me.

"A genie?" Zeus said, "I suppose you could think of it that way if you wanted. I am going to the park. Are you coming?"

"Yes," was the answer.

"I am not going the usual way. Brace yourself now."

That sensation of when Zeus healed the stings returned to me. This time, I looked at what Zeus was doing. At first, it looked as though he had severed one of his hands, but it was not a cut: his arm just faded away into nothing. Then, without further warning, I abruptly found myself standing behind a tree – one of the ones in the forest near the park. Zeus was standing next to me. My jaw instantly became closer to the ground.

"How did you do that?" I said, almost incoherently.

"I just took you through the fourth spatial dimension," Zeus answered confidently, "I should think you need to sit down." We sat on the pink bench. The skaters were in front of us again.

"Just a moment – the fourth spatial dimension?" I screamed.

The skaters looked around briefly and chuckled before continuing their skating.

"Do not worry," explained Zeus, "All will become clear soon. I love that word 'soon'. It's a temporal descriptor, a word to define a point in time out of so many other billions of them. It is such a novelty for me."

The conversation reached an awkward silence.

"Look," said Zeus, indicating the skaters. He put his hand behind his back, and Oberon watched as a boy skated up the side of the pipe, flew upwards, and did a twirl in mid-air. But it didn't stop there. He twirled again, and then, with increasing speed, he somersaulted for over ten times before falling and landing perfectly upright on the ground in front of his gaping companions. The boy himself was more shocked than they were, as they stood clapping in awe.

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"I notice you are a bit ashamed of all the litter around here," said Zeus.

"Yes," I said, "Isn't it disgusting?"

"I quite agree," he replied, and he pushed his hand through the air, as though the whole of space was the skin on a drum, and made every piece of litter in the park vanish in a flash.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, now getting ever so slightly more used to this 'magic', although I knew it wasn't magic. Or was it? "Is this *really* in accordance with physics?"

"Of course it is," Zeus assured me, "I merely put my hand into a higher dimension, picked up a piece of litter and threw it into non-space."

"Non-space?"

"What I call the space between the parallel universes. Because there are higher dimensions that are beyond time, as I've said, it all seems to happen instantaneously. You know, if your civilisation could penetrate space-time, they wouldn't need to worry about all of this land-fill nonsense. There's so much empty space in the multiverse, less than a millimetre away from every point in space and time."

"That's incredible." My heart was still beating fast. My body was operating as if in a dream world.

"And you know that quantum theory states that subatomic

particles can take an infinite number of paths simultaneously?"

"No," I said truthfully.

"Oh," Zeus said, quite taken aback at this, "Well your Earthling physicists have discovered it, you know. I would have thought that this one fascinating fact would be interesting enough for everyone to know it. Obviously you don't value science as much as the rest of the universe. Well, that's what particles can do – they have what's called a superposition – and that's similar to the way my hand works when it picks up all pieces of litter simultaneously."

I was interested, even if I didn't entirely understand the physics of it. The skaters, meanwhile, were still trying to get the boy to explain how in God's name he'd pulled off such a 'cool' trick.

"It's getting windy," said Zeus, and I abruptly became aware of the breeze that was rushing into my face at the time, almost as if Zeus had conjured it up just by mentioning it. "Would you like a hat?" and without waiting for a reply, Zeus conjured up a woolly hat and handed it to me.

"Er, thank you." I mounted it on my head. It fitted perfectly. "You could rule the world if you wanted."

"I already do," Zeus said with an air of not caring very much. He swished his hand and created a thunder bolt, which clapped over a forest in the distance. The skaters looked to the sky. Zeus created another thunder bolt to coincide with their concerned expressions. "But enough of that," said Zeus, reinstating the sun. "I am going for a walk in the forest."

It was shady in the forest, and quiet. There were no other people around. The air was noticeably fresher, and the litter was sparser, although I spotted the occasional broken glass bottle next to a tree trunk. The trees were extremely high, and their roots were conflicting with each other in places. We stopped in a clearing that was almost far enough from the road for the traffic noise to be inaudible.

"We need somewhere to sit," said Zeus, and he conjured up a two-seater leather sofa in the clearing in front of us. It was jade green.

"That's about the same colour as my sofa," I said, "Wouldn't you prefer blue? It's calmer, I think." Zeus changed the colour of the sofa to blue.

"Coffee table," Zeus mumbled, and a mahogany-made coffee

table with a glass surface appeared in front of the sofa. "We could have a drink while we're here too." A tray appeared on the table, then two cups and two saucers appeared on the tray, followed by a china teapot. "Or would you prefer a cold drink?" he said.

"No that's fine." We sat down together, and Zeus poured the tea. He did not pour it in the conventional way though. He merely directed an authoritative stance, accompanied with a nod, at the teapot, and the cups filled themselves with tea. I blinked, pinched my skin, and finally settled on smiling.

"Here you are," Zeus said, handing me a cup.

"Thank you very much. I never realised the potential of this forest for evening tea."

I suddenly remembered the suspended elliptical disc through which Clive and Cadence Nelson had disappeared, and the strange type of vehicle I had observed. "Oh, you want to ask me about that do you?" said Zeus.

"Yes," I said, "How did you know?" and then I realised, "Oh yes. You know everything." It was just a tad difficult to get used to this fact.

"Clive and Cadence Nelson are called Zirthirans, as you may have gathered. Now, they come from a much more advanced civilisation as I have said. Like Earth, they once invented vehicles that could move about their landscape and take them from place to place, similar to the ones you use here, but they are bigger and powered by something more sensible. On Zirth, you see, they only need one source of energy: antimatter. Antimatter is quite scarce in this universe, and it's difficult to make in large quantities, but in other parallel universes there is a plentiful supply. Zirthirans access such universes using what's called a wormhole. Have you heard of wormholes?"

"Yes, vaguely, I think."

"They're shortcuts through higher dimensional space that link other parts of a universe, different universes, or different times. And guess what they look like? Elliptical discs suspended in space-time. Myself, I don't need wormholes to get around, but it's very efficient for the Zirthirans. But first they invented these 'cars', and then when they found a stable way to create wormholes they completely revolutionised the whole of their technology. Everything can be powered with antimatter because even very small amounts harbour

huge amounts of energy."

"Incredible," I said, feeling that Earth was amazingly primitive for using something like petroleum. I took a sip of my tea.

"The best part is that antimatter energy doesn't give off any waste products. All you do is mix it with matter and you get ninety thousand million times its mass worth of energy. It's environmentally friendly. But the thing is: wormholes are a much better and more efficient way to travel as long as you can make them safe to use. So the Zirthirans started using them instead of cars. The roads on Zirth are virtually redundant as a consequence, and so there's little or no traffic on the roads at all. It's quite a contrast to this horrible place. The Zirthirans soon created vast networks of wormholes that could take people right across the universe – the only drawback is that it's time consuming and expensive on resources. I came to Earth via their wormhole network, only it was under maintenance at the time. Would you like to hear the story of how I got here?"

"Of course," I said, listening with interest as Zeus recounted his feelings.

"When I arrived at the wormhole network, I was immediately amazed. It was my first moment in the lesser dimensions, and the experience for me was indescribably flabbergasting. It's nothing like I've ever experienced before. There was one moment, and there were the blue tunnels – made of a fragile spongy plasma – and they were in one shape, and one configuration. And then – and this was the truly incredible and altogether unimaginable concept – there was another moment. And the walls were still there, in the same place, in the same shape, in the same arrangement that they had been in that previous moment. I must have spent hordes of these moments just staring at the same place, so new and exciting was the sensation.

"I flexed a limb. Incredible! I could actually watch as each stage of the process of flexing was carried out: one stage after another. It was as though it had all been split up into separate limbs, which were spread out over the time dimension, each one slightly different from the last. Then came the ultimate experiment: testing out the 'locomotion mechanism', as I referred to it then. I had started off in one position, and, using my legs, I was able to step from that position, across the actual space in between, arriving at the position of another location. I could even see my perception of the surroundings update as

I went through the action! Something *you* take for granted.

"I spent an indeterminate period just experimenting like this. I hopped, I ran, I sat, I jumped, and I walked into the walls, each time being unsuccessful in passing through them. As I pressed against them, they pulsed and glowed slightly. Quite an awe-inspiring sight. Indeed, if anyone had been observing me (and of course I made sure that nobody had been, afterwards), I must have looked quite a silly sight. Yes – I was actually inside the tunnels, restricted by its own spatial boundaries. In other words, I felt trapped.

"Granted, there was no kind of far-seeing feature, but really it was such an exciting new realm of possibilities that I didn't care for the duration of my experimentation. But, as you might imagine, I quickly felt limited by the things that I could do. I simply had to come up with that mechanism – the mechanism by which I could easily slip out of the realm of perception, go and perform some higher action, and then slide back into it. Of course, it would not seem as though any period of 'time' had elapsed in my absence. I even managed to perfect the art of walking through those plain old walls – it was just a matter of jumping out and jumping in continuously, controlling myself almost like a puppet. And from the outside, other people would never notice the seams. I mastered a few tricks, and soon felt very comfortable in this new world, no longer trapped by it, but Lord of it, controller of it.

"I got to a point in a particular tunnel and warped it around so that it joined up with somewhere more interesting. I adjoined the two, and so it looked just like any other junction in the network. I changed into a psychedelic suit, with all sorts of electrifying colours in glaring stripes, and I put my hands in my pockets, and strode out in front of the unsuspecting Zirthiran. I smiled at him, and nodded a bit, maybe a little frightened of speaking to somebody one-to-one for the first time. A quick bit of research – or rather, an instantaneous bit of research – and I ascertained his destination.

"‘Looking for the planet Earth?’ I asked. He fainted. I made a mental note: people don't like it when strangers know things about them. Unless he was dazzled by my costume, of course.

"I dashed off to reread a few hundred first aid manuals, and returned to help the poor guy out.

"‘How are you feeling?’ I said, ‘Everything OK now?’

"I assisted him to his feet. He seemed a little dazed, but soon

got accustomed to things again. I escorted him to the end of the tunnel, and he gave his quaint explanation for the wormhole maintenance.

"‘Yes, I gathered all that,’ I said.

"‘Oh you gathered it did you?’ he answered, probably infuriated at how much I seemed to know.

"‘Yes I did.’ I hope I hadn't sounded too flippant. ‘It's on the notice just around here.’

"We turned the corner, and my acquaintance read the notice from Corfizz.

"‘I thought you said you hadn't been here before.’

"‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘I thought I said that too.’ But I couldn't leave it at that. I went off to develop a story of why I might be there, and I saw that he was just about to ask me that anyway, so it was only too soon.

"‘So why are you here?’ he asked me. I realised at this point that it wasn't just me on the learning curve – for what was he too doing, if not searching for truth? I took him back to the junction from which I had accosted him, and from it, I dragged out my prop.

"‘What is that?’ he exclaimed.

"‘It's a pink bench,’ I explained. There was an awkward pause."

"So that's how it got here!" I laughed.

"Yes. And he said ‘What are you doing with it?’

"‘It's a pink bench,’ I repeated, ‘It's for sitting on.’

"‘Yes I gathered that,’ he said.

"‘Oh you gathered it did you?’

"‘Yes I did.’ He was quite intelligent really. ‘What are you doing with it?’

"‘I'm delivering it to the planet Earth,’ I answered.

"‘Who on Earth would want a hideous bench like that?’ he thought to himself.

"‘Well, nobody,’ I responded, ‘It's going in to an outdoor display.’

"He gave me a flummoxed face as though he'd just seen a nine-dimensional calculus paper floating in his fish tank. I made a mental note: people don't like it when strangers read their minds. I stared into the man's imperfect face, and inspected his imperfect clothes. I couldn't imagine how he might be feeling in my presence, but a quick

check revealed that he was really more bamboozled than he was envious.

"‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘It must be difficult to find the planet Earth, especially with the wormhole network down like it is. It’ll take an eternity to get there. If not more.’

"‘Well...’ he said, beginning to protest.

"‘Since we’re headed in the same direction,’ said I, but of course, I originally didn’t have a clue where I was going. That’s how I chose Earth – because he happened to be going there. ‘It seems only natural that we help each other to get there.’ I conjured up a tear in the fabric of the realm. It flexed and pulsated, and opened out, rotating clockwise, and revealing the wormhole within.

"‘You’re not going to go through there are you?’ he said. It’s dangerous, you see, when the network is down.

"‘Do you want to get there or not?’ I answered. And of course, I made sure it took us safely to exactly the place he was wanting to go to: Earth."

"So why were you wearing that costume?" I asked.

"The reason I was wearing that psychedelic suit is really quite simple. I made it a few eternities ago, but I never got around to showing it to anybody. The trick of it is that, reading from left to right and top to bottom, the light frequencies of all the colours, when converted to audio frequencies, speaks the sentence: ‘What are *you* looking at?’ – it’s the ultimate fashion statement."

I laughed.

"So," Zeus continued, "that thing you saw in the alley was a wormhole, which the Nelsons were using to get them back to Zirth. There happened to be a Zirthiran car parked just in front of the wormhole’s mouth."

"I see. So who was this man you met in the tunnels?"

"You have met him too," said Zeus, "He’s a Zirthiran as well. He met you in the pub once."

"But why are they here?"

"In time, Oberon! All of your questions will be answered in time. Remember – I am new to the concept; I do not wish to rush things. That defeats the object."

"So you really have no perception of time?"

"I do now. In the tenth dimension, there was no time for me,

and no concept of parallel universes either."

"Parallel universes?" I said, thinking I may have heard of the theory.

"You must have heard of it – it's the way every single possibility has its own universe."

"*Everything?*"

"Oh yes."

"Please explain."

Zeus sighed. "You see, the smallest possible component of the universe is, in the language of your own scientists, the *p-brane*, otherwise known as a subatomic particle. Their quantum mechanical movements constitute an infinite number of possible directions, which means that there are an infinite number of parallel universes. Hence, *everything* is enacted in a universe somewhere. For example, your life is being played out backwards in one universe. It's quite funny."

"You've seen it?"

"Obviously. I can see them all simultaneously from the tenth dimension, as I've said." I steadied my dizziness by holding on to the arm of the seat. I tried not to think about it for too long. "Think of a fiction book," said Zeus.

"A fiction book?" I named one.

"Its story is being played out in a parallel universe. Every fictional story is hence a reality."

"But the fiction books are not scientifically sound," I said, finishing my tea.

"They *are* scientifically sound in the universe that they are being played out in," Zeus said. "Would you like to go home now?"

"Well..."

"OK – I can tell you are quite exhausted."

"Well, thanks for the tea," I said. (Tea with God, I thought; quite amusing really)

"No problem." We stood up.

"I see you've finished yours without ever having taken a sip from it," I observed.

"Yes, I had it while I was talking."

Zeus made the sofa disappear, and the coffee table, and the tray, and finally the empty mugs which were still in our hands. He made us leave the forest, reappearing just inside my front porch.

I noticed there was some post on the floor. I picked up the two envelopes: one was brown; the other white. I opened the white one to be greeted by a bulk of exclusive offers, adverts and competitions. There was a free trial CD for an Internet service provider sandwiched between the junk mail (I used the trial CDs as coasters, and I was building up a substantial collection. I wondered why you couldn't return them for recycling).

The brown envelope was more promising. It had the word 'Yenom' on the top of the letter. I ripped it open. They were accepting my application! I could start the next day; my hours were more or less the same as for my previous job.

"I've got another job. It's at the Yenom Accounting business," I said.

"Well done," said Zeus as we walked through the front door and into the lounge. I was certainly getting a lot more used to being in the company of Zeus now that I understood something of what was going on. But just as I had thought this to myself, Zeus announced: "I think I ought to be going."

"Going?"

"I'll just disappear."

"What will you be doing tonight?" I asked.

"I don't need to do anything. I can instantaneously come to the future time when we see each other next. Which, as I can see by looking down the time dimension, will be early tomorrow morning when you are ready to go to work and are on your third nervous cup of coffee waiting for the right time to come for you to leave."

I chuckled. "Right. But I still have questions..."

"You must leave it all for later," said Zeus, "or else this chapter will become inordinately long."

"Goodbye then," I said awkwardly.

Zeus vanished.

For the rest of the evening, I was thinking constantly about Zeus and his seemingly 'magical' abilities, and dreaming of the advanced civilisations I had never before been able to imagine...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You can't sack me!"

"Excuse me a moment," the boss said to his caller.

"You can't do it," said Miranda, stepping further into the office and allowing the door to slam behind her.

"Do you mind?" the boss said, indicating the telephone. Miranda snatched the receiver from his hand and cut off the call.

"You know you didn't really mean it," she said, leaning over his desk.

"You realise you've cut off my call?"

"I know!"

"Do you know how important that call was?"

"I don't care. Just admit that you didn't know what you were saying."

"Look – you're obsessed with aliens and strange encounters, and you don't have any evidence for all the extraterrestrial occurrences you claim to have witnessed; you're constantly wasting your time and mine trying to convince me and you go storming into people's offices, cut them off from important 'phone calls and demand to be absolved. Why would I not have meant it?"

"But my work on The Platypus Conspiracy! You have to keep me for that. You always said how diligent I was."

"Betty is coping just fine with The Platypus Conspiracy on her own – besides, people are losing interest."

"Then all the more reason to have something new! The magic I've seen!"

"The Platypus Conspiracy had pictures, Miranda - pictures that mislead people into believing things. You have nothing."

"The Flamingo Story had no photographs. You told Amanda not to waste her time."

"The Flamingo Story was different. You know full well it would have been almost illegal to put photographs of that guy on the front page."

"Well, any page."

"Yes."

"Look – you can't do it. I know that Betty can't cope on her own. I know her better than you do. And..."

"Miranda," the boss interrupted severely, "We'll strike a deal

shall we? Let's just say that you haven't been sacked. But instead, let's say you've just been given a long, *long* vacation. OK?"

"A vacation?"

"Yes. Go somewhere. Go to Miami or something."

"A vacation with pay?"

"Yes! With pay: in fact, just about the same you'd get in a redundancy package."

Miranda sighed.

"Yes," she said, "I understand."

"Goodbye Miranda."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I awoke I was in an ambivalent mood. Zeus and his amazing 'scientific tricks' were the first things on my mind. I remembered our evening tea in the forest clearing, the way he had played a trick on that skater, the way he had conjured things up from thin air and then made them vanish again, and all of the simply astounding things we had talked about, and the incredible information that I – a simple Englishman – was probably the only man in the world to know. The fact was unavoidable: my life had changed forever – and whether or not this Zeus character would continue to befriend *me*, of all people, I knew I would never look at the world in the same way again. However, what also popped into my head that morning was the thought of starting work.

Now, Zeus to me was a figure of safety and security, of kindness, politeness, all-knowing and omnipotent. But I was nonetheless starting a new job, and although it was in the same business as the one I had before, I couldn't help but get anxious: it was quite natural really. I remembered being even more nervous before my first day at Westminster.

I had woken up far too early as well. I don't know exactly why; perhaps anxiety about the job had something to do with it, or maybe excitement on Zeus's account. I wouldn't be able to go back to sleep though, that was for sure. I made my way to the kitchen, where a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee was waiting for me. I had too much on my mind to dwell on this.

Before I knew it, I was on my third cup of coffee and there were still three quarters of an hour to spare before it was time to leave. I put the empty cup by the sink in the kitchen, and lo and behold: Zeus appeared *in* the sink.

"Zeus?" I exclaimed, staring at the miniaturised version of him as he waved at me, a short distance from the plug hole.

"Hi!" he called, "You have a charming basin."

I chuckled. "Thank you. Do you want some coffee?" Zeus appeared next to me in his ordinary size.

"No thank you," he said, and paused. "Today's your day. New job."

"I know, I know," I said.

"Now, as you will remember, my visit here is a journey of

discovery, and I have selected you for my 'research'. To that end, I should like to follow you to work, to see precisely how it is you earn your wealth and live your life."

"I see," I said, "Well that is all very well, but how will I explain why you're with me?"

"You needn't explain anything. I shall vanish: like this—" and he did so to illustrate the point, his disembodied voice continuing: "I'll follow you around, and you can communicate with me if you need to just by thinking. If you require reassurance that I'm there, I'll make a coughing sound." Zeus reappeared. "How does that sound?"

"That sounds good. But I am still a little nervous about my new job, you know."

"There is nothing to fear!" Zeus said with a wide and comforting smile. "I shall be with you all the time. Now – how does one get there ordinarily?"

"Well, nowadays people leave two hours before the start of work, get in their car and prepare for some serious traffic pandemonium," I exaggerated. Zeus scoffed.

"Ridiculous," he said, "This way." He miniaturised himself, appearing on the counter next to the sink. "Come on down!" Before I could object, I suddenly found myself standing on a beach next to an empty swimming pool – I almost believed it for a minute, but of course it was my pine kitchen surfaces next to the basin; I had been shrunk too! I wasn't given time to look around or become accustomed to it – Zeus was already heading off towards the taps. I followed briskly.

"Where are we going?" I said, as we reached the taps. Zeus looked at me briefly, and then jumped backwards, falling straight off into the sink. I hurried to the edge. I looked down. I found him abseiling down the plug cord.

"To work," he said, when his feet hit the ground. "Come on."

Cautiously I turned around and took a good grip of the chain. Instead of abseiling, I settled for a slow climb down. Zeus was waiting for me with his hands on his hips. I felt like I was in a huge silver vat – the walls of the basin must have been three or four times my height. But there was no opportunity to stand in wonder: Zeus was striding forth, heading for the plug hole. When we got there, I found it was no longer my plug hole.

"It's a wormhole," I said, staring at the unmistakable silver disc, glowing and pulsating like a mystical vortex. Through it I could see a quite ordinary street – a bird's-eye view in fact.

"Off we go then," said Zeus.

"We're not going down it are we?" I said.

"Of course we are."

"Why can't you just take me through the fourth dimension like last time?" I said, much less than calmly.

"Where's the fun in that?" he said, and promptly took hold of my arm, and dragged me down the wormhole after him.

We were falling down a seemingly eternal blue tunnel – like a vertical pipeline. I saw gold and silver spirals of light spinning around the tunnel boundaries. The speed was phenomenal. I screamed instinctively.

"Perhaps I forgot to mention it," said Zeus, on the way down, "wormholes do go through hyperspace. But they do it in style."

We were plummeting down this eternal tunnel when suddenly it changed direction. We were going left, then right, and then it opened up completely onto blackness. But I could still feel myself falling... then I was back in a tunnel, inexorably being rocketed under hoops and through arches as though on a roller-coaster ride. I saw us pass through other wormholes. I saw gates quickly opening up just before we smashed into them, and glowing rings, like force fields, that seemed to speed us up. Then, as abruptly as it had started, it stopped.

We emerged in the open air. I was gasping for air. We were outside a fairly stubby office block with glass doors, small windows and a large sign that read 'Yenom Accounting'. I looked around quickly to see if anyone might have noticed our abrupt and wholly inexplicable arrival. Quite a few people were walking straight past – but they hadn't seen a thing. Zeus had gone, but before I had time to panic, I heard a cough from nowhere, and I knew he was there. I sighed, composed myself, and when my dizziness had subsided I pushed open the double doors of the building and stepped inside.

The main entrance hall was spacious, carpeted in red, and had plain white walls. The overall effect was undoubtedly pink. There was a front reception desk, and another desk on the opposite side of the room with a well dressed female secretary sat at the computer that was atop it. Her legs were crossed, she wore glasses, and a man in a shirt

and tie was leaning over the desk talking to her. When I stepped further into the room, the man noticed me, like I'd activated a trigger.

"Ah!" he said, and walked away from the desk towards me. He was a young man, with a lot of energy – at first glance, not the sort of person you'd expect to be an accountant. "Oberon is it?" he said, "Oberon Furrow?"

"Yes that's me," I replied and we shook hands.

"I'm the manager," he said. He did not smile as he said any of this, but appeared enthusiastic enough. "Sean Branch. I'll need to show you around. You've had a lot of previous experience in accounting haven't you?"

"I have," I answered.

"You won't need much explanation then. This is Susan," he said gesturing briefly to the woman at the desk, and then walking hastily on to the back of the room where there was a corridor.

"Pleased to meet you Susan," I said quickly with a nod in her direction, but there was no time for formal introductions because I needed to catch up with Sean. He was now at the furthest door left in the corridor.

"Right," Sean said. He had a mildly deep voice, and his expression read 'one-track': the sort of blank expression that indicated to me he was an exceptionally busy man. "Filing room. That's where we keep all the old hard copy records of invoices, cash books and so on." He walked down the corridor to the next door. "Bookkeeping offices. Computers. Database. You put the old records in the Filing Room when you've finished."

He moved to the next door. "Managerial office," he said, and went straight to the next door without stopping, "Conference room," and he went to the next door again, not looking to see if I was actually keeping up with any of this. "Financial accounting offices. Bookkeeping done. Computers. Do an annual summary. Standard stuff. All the computers are networked."

We reached the end of the corridor and Sean turned around and strode back to the main entrance hall. I followed like an exhausted puppy. A man was coming through the front door, brushing his hair and doing up the buttons of his jacket simultaneously, carrying a briefcase under his arm.

"And this is our accountant," said Sean, gesturing to the man,

who was clearly out of breath. He approached me and shook my hand.

"I'm Max Ronnich," said Max in a gasp of breath.

"Oberon Furrow," I said as we released hands. "So Yenom has an accountant?" I asked Sean.

"Of course," said Sean, "Every business has an accountant, even accountancies need accountants. There's someone who works here who's the accountant of another accountancy elsewhere in town. Now, there's a meeting. In the conference room. At eleven o'clock. OK?"

"OK." This was going to be amusing, I thought to myself, to have a conference with Sean – a man that spoke entirely in key words or phrases, as if he himself were a summary sheet.

"If you go to the bookkeeping offices now you'll meet George – he's the assistant head of department. He'll take you to Barney: temporary vice trainee deputy departmental head. He's your port of call when you need Sam. Sam's the deputy departmental head, but today you'll need to ask Sam to introduce you to Fred. He'll assign you a job. You'll know what to do."

"Thank you," I said.

Upon entering the bookkeeping office, I was greeted by the sound of a crowd of people touch-typing. It was a fairly modern room with partitions for each worker, comprising a desk with a computer. They all had mounds of paperwork on their desk. Suddenly a man in a brown suit popped up in front of me.

"I'm Fred," he said, "You're Oberon Furrow aren't you?"

"Yes. I thought I had to see George, and Barney and Sam first?"

"Oh, they're out sick. Anyway, come with me." I followed him to a vacant partition where there was a desk with mounds of paperwork on it already. "You'll be in charge of H.C. Hydraulics. There are the invoices," he said, patting the pile that was on the desk, "Cash books in the first drawer; other ledgers in the second."

"Fine. Thanks Fred," I said. He left the partition. I sat down at the desk. There was a cough. Zeus was evidently still around. I was almost expecting him to have got bored and gone away. I decided to 'test out' Zeus's powers. I got a batch of the first five invoices, and then loaded the database program on the computer. This was almost identical to how it worked in my last job. I only had to think of the

five invoices being added to the database, and sure enough, five records appeared there on the screen. Now this was the ultimate way to use a computer.

Fred came back.

"One more thing," he said, and then glanced at the computer screen, "Hey, you've done five already! That's quick. Anyway, there may be additional ledgers in the filing cabinets at the back, all right? Coffee break's at quarter to 'leven and lunch is at one."

"Right, thanks," I said. Fred went away.

I could easily do the entire batch of invoices at once, of course, but that would be just too suspicious. In fact, in reality I needn't be working at all. Zeus could easily conjure up vast amounts of money for me – surely – and I would never have to worry about anything again. There was a cough. I thought about it for a while. That would be even more suspicious. Besides, Zeus's whole reason for being here was to see what *I* do. I assured myself it was best to keep Zeus and his abilities in higher dimensions a secret. Start small, I thought. This was going to be fun anyway.

I would put the invoices on the database myself, and it wouldn't matter how slowly and leisurely I did it because I could always get Zeus to do a few every now and again. How easy could earning a living be now?

Coffee break at quarter to eleven came soon enough. There was a long queue at the coffee machine in the main hall, and so I sat at my desk and had Zeus get a cup of coffee for me. Zeus made himself visible, and sat on the edge of the desk.

"Hello," he said, "This is easy work isn't it?"

"Hmm," I answered.

"I have an idea," Zeus said, "Why don't I stay visible to you, but so that I can't be seen by any of your co-workers?"

"Can you do that?"

"What sort of a question is that?"

"Well then it's a good idea, but we mustn't talk too much because if someone were to catch me talking to thin air they'd send me to a mental institute."

Zeus chuckled, "OK. I seem to be getting the hang of this 'one event after another thing'. It's fun, but let me get one thing straight: one thing only happens because it's the *effect* of a *cause*; is that right?"

"Yes. Cause and effect. It only ever works that way." I finished my coffee.

"Well, not in every universe."

"I need to go to the conference now," I said, not thinking of a universe where effects precede their causes. We got up and went to the corridor. Zeus walked through a couple of people on the way, proving to me that they were oblivious to him.

The conference room was quite large – probably just large enough for a couple of army land rovers to fit in it. There was a large meeting table in it instead. A projector sat on the table and a screen hung on the opposite wall; there was also a stand-alone photocopier and fax machine. The fax machine looked as if it hadn't been used for years. Some people were already sitting at the table, talking amongst themselves. I sat next to a man I hadn't met before. Zeus wandered around the room, going through the table and occasionally through the walls in a very casual manner.

"You're new here aren't you?" said the man next to me.

"Yes, I started today. I'm Oberon Furrow."

"I'm John Eaves." We shook hands. John's voice was quite scratchy. He was very young, like almost everyone there, and he didn't smile either. Not surprisingly, many people at the table were smoking; John was one of them. A copy of the financial times was on the table being ignored.

More and more people arrived: a man with blonde hair and a constant smirk, Susan the secretary, another woman in a very tight skirt, and several more men with their briefcases. The last person to arrive, at ten past eleven, was Sean. When he came, he went straight to the front of the room without looking at anyone.

"Right," he began, "A general meeting today. But we need to wait for Max, our accountant. He's got to give me the balance sheet. While we wait: a notice. The coffee machine. It's broken down." There was a groan from most people sitting at the table. "We'll get it fixed as soon as possible."

Zeus went behind Sean to the white screen that was set up. He took the cord away from the hook at the bottom, and the screen rolled up. Everyone turned their head to look. Sean gave an abrupt chuckle, and then unravelled the screen again and hooked it up.

"Max shouldn't be long," he said. There was a pause, and then

Zeus took the screen off the hook again. "Why?" Sean muttered, and then put it right once more. Then Max arrived. He ran into the room with the balance sheet in his hand, his hair dishevelled and his jacket unbuttoned, allowing his tie to fly about the place as he ran. He almost tripped over the leg of the table too.

"Sorry for the delay," he said, handing Sean the sheet.

"Thanks," Sean said sarcastically as he snatched it. Max left the room. "Now then." He projected the balance sheet figures up on the screen.

Zeus put the screen up. Everyone laughed.

"Why does it keep doing that?" Sean said. The strange thing was, I thought: the wall was white, so it made little difference having the screen up or down anyway. But Sean simply insisted on having the sheet projected on the screen.

As Mr. Branch spoke about the figures, Zeus lay himself down on top of the table as if he was sunbathing. I tried to ignore him. After a while he got off the table and stepped behind a man on the other side of the table from me. Zeus patted the man's shoulder and he bolted his head round to see what it was. Zeus laughed, and nobody heard of course.

"Are you all right Pete?" Sean said, not in a concerned voice but in the middle of a sigh.

"Yes thank you," said Pete, still looking nervously from side to side. Sean continued what he was saying. Eventually he finished what he wanted to say on the subject of the balance sheet and switched the projector off.

"Now," said Sean, "It's audit time, I have to inform you." There were sighs from around the table, "So tomorrow there is a team of auditors from Accounting Direct coming. They will be doing... the usual things." Accounting Direct, I was relieved to hear, was not the firm at which I used to work. "The day after that, we will be auditing Accounting Direct. You'll need to come here first on that day to collect the necessary paperwork before driving on there. I shall give you the directions later today. Right. That's it. You can continue your work."

Many of the meeting's attendants had already started to leave. One man stood up and turned to Sean.

"I'd like to see the coffee machine. It was working perfectly when I got my coffee."

Sean noticed that I was watching this.

"This is Matthew O. Maticks," Sean said, gesturing to him, "an executive financial accountant at the firm." Matthew looked as though he could be one of the oldest workers at Yenom, although he couldn't have been much over forty.

"Hello," he said before quickly turning back to Sean, "Show me that it doesn't work."

"Fine," said Sean, leaving the room. I stopped Matthew before he followed on.

"That's a rather convenient name isn't it?" I said, "Matt O. Maticks?"

"Psychology in the job interview," he replied, "You know what I'm saying? The real name's Cedric Marmes, but hey – it's kept me in work all this time: it can't be a bad thing."

Cedric left the room and Zeus and I followed. Zeus was laughing. We went to the entrance hall. The secretary was taking her place behind the desk, and Sean and Cedric had arrived at the coffee machine.

"Show me," Cedric demanded, his arms folded.

"You see you order a coffee," Sean explained, putting in a Euro coin and pressing a button, "And look."

Zeus pointed to the coffee machine. A coffee in a plastic cup came out of the dispenser.

"And you get a cup of coffee," said Sean, blushing.

"Thank you," said Cedric smartly, "I'll be going back to work now."

"But..." Sean said, as Cedric moved away, but Sean could say nothing to explain the embarrassing situation.

Zeus and I walked back to my partition in the bookkeeping office, continuing to work in the way that we had been before the conference; I was very much enjoying it. It was soon lunch time, and I walked out to the entrance hall, Zeus following lazily behind. Sean was there.

"Are you doing OK?" he asked.

"Fine thanks Sean."

"There's a canteen called Neat Eats down the street on the right. That's where most people go for lunch."

"Thanks," I said and left the building with Zeus. The sun was

out, and its warmth hit me quite suddenly.

"I know where we can go for lunch," said Zeus, pulling me aside from the door.

"Where?" Zeus looked around to see if anyone was watching. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to anyone else. Zeus clicked his fingers and abruptly – Yenom Accounting was gone. We reappeared sitting at a table with a chequered cloth over it, staring across a river at – I was quite stunned to see it for the first time in my life and with such little warning – the Eiffel Tower.

"Here!" said Zeus, lifting his arms.

"*Qu'est-ce que vous désirez?*" came a voice. I looked around to see a waiter, carrying a menu and a notepad. Zeus passed the Corfizz Translator Device to me underneath the table.

"Thanks," I whispered to him. The waiter handed me a menu, and one for Zeus, who had obviously made himself visible again.

"I would like a green salad," I said, using the Device to translate it into French, "with the chicken please."

"*Et vous, monsieur?*" the waiter said, turning to Zeus and finishing scribbling Oberon's order down.

"The same, please," he said in French.

"*Merci messieurs,*" and the waiter left, entering the charming little café behind them.

"Poor waiter," said Zeus with an element of sympathy in his tone.

"Why?" I asked.

"He is not happy," Zeus answered, "He's just had a second divorce and he's had to move house for lack of money. This is a part time job of his. He also works at the *boulangerie* down the street."

"I see," I said, "And how old is he?"

"Thirty-four," Zeus replied. "His name's Pierre, and he used to be married to Francesca. Quite a shame isn't it?"

Pierre returned with two plates, each with a bowl on them containing the salad and large slabs of cheese. There was a complimentary roll with a tiny cube of butter wrapped in foil.

"Thank you very much," I said, or rather, the Translator did.

"*Merci Pierre,*" said Zeus.

"Pierre?" the waiter repeated, a smile forming on his face, "How did you know my name?"

"An educated guess," said Zeus. Pierre frowned and smiled at the same time, and then left the table.

"Try not to be so suspicious," I warned Zeus, "There aren't a lot of people who believe you can know someone's name simply through 'an educated guess'."

"OK, OK."

The meal was quite delicious. When we had finished, I paid the bill and we stood, hands in pockets, looking at the Tower. There were many other people doing precisely the same thing, and it sounded like most of them were tourists.

"We'll have to come here again tomorrow for lunch," I said, "This is a lovely place you know."

"True, but then we could go to Rome tomorrow," Zeus said, "Or Berlin. Or New York. Or Moscow! Anywhere, really." A man walked in front of us at that moment and looked at Zeus strangely, evidently having heard what he was saying. I laughed.

"I like it here," I said, "We can go to those other places later. One magical appearance at a foreign café at a time, eh?"

We strolled around to an empty corner of the café area, and when we were sure there was nobody about, someone came. We waited longer. We were standing in a corner with a 'phone booth, and it was surrounded by bushes and trees that shielded it from anywhere else: quite convenient for a swift hyper-spatial escape. However, we had to listen to the man on the 'phone arguing with someone about his groceries. When he had gone, a woman arrived and walked straight past, and then following her were two young men smoking and talking, and then another man on his mobile 'phone. And then there was a crowd of people, men and women, some smoking, some on their mobile 'phone.

"We can't wait this long," said Zeus, and he pointed at the group of people in front of them, causing them to vanish. Then he wrenched us through the higher dimensions, straight back outside the entrance to 'Yenom'.

"Are you going to put those people back?" I asked, concerned. It was the sort of question a person would never envisage saying in their life, especially in this context.

"I have done," Zeus announced, "And I've made myself invisible to everyone else again."

"Oh good," I said. Everything was going surprisingly swiftly; I was almost beginning to wonder whether there was a storyline lined up for me at all.

After more bookkeeping work, I finished the HC Hydraulics work and Fred gave me the documents for another business, a more interesting one. The working day finally came to a close, and Sean approached me to ask how things had gone.

"Absolutely fine," I answered.

"Fred said you were very quick you know." I just laughed at this. "Look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Don't forget the audit. Bye."

"Goodbye Sean."

Zeus and I left the building, found a convenient moment, and 'teleported' to my driveway. The road outside my house seemed to be just as congested as it had in the rush hour. Zeus's method was really the only way to travel!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I took some time out on Frego before continuing my work. My tears were shed liberally. A passing Fregoan offered me her company, but I just wanted to be alone. Little did I know that worse revelations were to come, revelations that I fear I may not have the courage to put down into words. It would be dangerous, I know, but I felt compelled to help them. But I remember the old argument. Maybe it's cruel, but perhaps they only look worthy of help because the Perception Engine makes them look like us.

But what of this being, whoever it was, that had helped me to reach Earth? Why did he want to go there? Was the pink bench story just a cover-up?

I think it was the intrigue of this that compelled me to continue my mission. Were it not for my curiosity, I think I would have campaigned to have the planet struck off the register of the intelligence quotients on the grounds of the stress involved in the job of collecting the data.

I took out the Conterrogator to examine the other subjects – the people of Earth yet to be interrogated for the survey. Having only done three, the amount remaining (which was done on a stratified basis), was huge. If only there was some way that the subjects could come to *me*, rather than being compelled to go to *them*. I looked at the next one in the sequence: a young boy who looked distinctly ill-cared for; he was very thin indeed.

I was just about to get up when the Fregoan returned, accompanied by another.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes thank you," I said, "I need to get back to my employment."

"Where do you work?"

"Corfizz Statistics and Demographics – I conduct the intelligence surveys."

She looked to her companion, and he looked back to her. She murmured, as though seeking confirmation, and received a nod in reply. She turned back to face me.

"I think we can help you there. Come with me."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When I got up the next morning, I recalled almost instantly the fun I had experienced the previous day at Yenom Accounting at the hands of Zeus, and I could not resist a smile. In fact, I would even go as far as to say that I felt *optimistic*.

A 'phone call that morning shattered my confidence, perhaps only slightly. It was from Victor. Quite honestly I had forgotten about Victor for some time, or it just felt like a long time. I inherently felt rather guilty about this neglect of my best friend, but I admit I tried hard not to let it spoil my mood. And besides, with Zeus around, what could possibly go wrong in life?

"Hello Victor. It's good to hear from you," I had said, "I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for a while."

"That's all right. How are you then?"

"Fine, as usual, thanks. I got the job at Yenom."

"Oh well done! That's excellent news; how are you finding it? Easy to get used to I suppose?"

"Yes. Very similar to my old job."

"Have you heard any more from that Zeus fellow?" Victor asked, retaining the friendliness in his voice. I paused, remembering that I had agreed not to tell anyone about Zeus and the sorts of things he did. Victor would hardly believe me if I told him anyway, but still, I had to keep my word.

"No," I replied, "No I haven't. And how are you?"

"OK. Mustn't grumble." I particularly disliked this saying. I was not entirely sure why, but if there was something to grumble about – something that could be improved in your life – I didn't see why you shouldn't have the right to do so.

"Well I'll speak to you soon. I've got to get to work. There's an audit today," I told Victor, thankful I had remembered the audit.

"Yeah OK; well I'll see you around."

"Bye." We hung up and I thought no more about the conversation that day. After breakfast, I opened the dishwasher to put my plate inside, and saw that Zeus was already there – flanked by two plates that were almost twice his size. I laughed.

"Hello!" Zeus shouted up at me.

"Hello," I said, bringing my plate further inside.

"I'll take that," Zeus said taking hold of the plate, and

manoeuvring it around so that it slotted into the row behind him. He vanished, and reappeared sitting on top of the kitchen counter in his ordinary size. I closed the dishwasher and turned to face him.

"Are you ready to go?" he said.

"Yes," I said, "But this time, no roller-coaster wormhole rides, OK?".

"Spoil my fun why don't you!" Zeus said, jumping off the counter. "Here we go."

He executed a (quite unnecessary, I discovered) flourish with his arms, and we swiftly arrived outside Yenom. This time there was more activity than the previous day, with several cars stopped outside it and people getting in and out of them constantly. Despite this, nobody noticed in the slightest the way in which Zeus and I had entered the scene. They hurried about, all with their own problems, and all looking down at the floor, or at their wristwatches, or just blankly into space, as if nothing else existed but themselves and their own lives. I had unconsciously adopted Zeus's manner by gazing all around me, taking in every possible detail I could.

"Just what do you think you're doing here again?" the boss roared, with grit teeth.

"I'm collecting my stuff," Miranda replied, looking up from her desk drawer. "You know: ready for my long, long vacation."

The boss grunted and left the room, having forgotten what he came in for.

"So you'll be coming back then?" said Betty, peering round from her computer.

"Well, I hope so," Miranda said, finding that document near the bottom of the drawer that was absolutely vital to a story from a few years ago, the one that must have cost them thousands in lost profits because nobody could find it. "Look what I found," she said, showing it to Betty.

"They always turn up when you least need them." She chuckled. "Anyway, I'm a little concerned I won't be able to do The Platypus Conspiracy on my own."

"You'll be fine. It'll be over soon anyway. People are losing interest."

"Me especially," said Betty.

"I'll help you over the Net if you need it."

"Thanks."

Miranda went over to the filing cabinet by the window and took out some of her files. As she flicked through them, something caught her attention in the corner of her eye. She stopped and looked out of the window.

"I suppose people are getting more interested in Regal Scandal Number 41, aren't they?" Betty continued, thinking aloud. "Or is it 42 now? I lose count. Yes, I suppose I shall see The Platypus die just like the Flamingo won't I? Miranda?"

Miranda was in a world of her own.

"So that's where he's working..." she mumbled to herself.

"Miranda?" Betty repeated.

"Sorry Betty - I've got to go." She turned around, snatched her stuff and her handbag and rushed to the door of the office. "I'll see you around."

Immediately I saw that there was a crowd growing around the coffee machine. Susan the secretary was amongst one of the people desperately trying to get at the machine, holding a one Euro coin out as if it were magically going to fly out of her hand and into the slot so that she could claim a drink instead of the people in front of her in the queue. Of course, Zeus noticed this as well, and made the coin do just that: it flew into the slot, and the crowd promptly dispersed from the machine in shock and gasps.

"Oh wow!" Susan exclaimed, "I got it in! That was my coin," she told the others, "So that's my drink," she stated in a quieter voice, taking the cup from the dispenser. Because the crowd had dispersed, I could now see that the coffee machine was no longer serving just coffee, but cappuccinos and hot chocolates too. This was probably the reason for all the fuss. Susan walked off confidently. She was wearing her thickly framed glasses, with wide eyes behind them. Her face was heavily made up, her clothes were tight, and her skirt was short. She was blatantly drawing attention to the cup of cappuccino that was in her hand.

I spotted Sean looking at the computer screen that was on

Susan's desk. He was standing up, holding a pair of glasses up to the corner of his mouth with one hand, and smoking absently using the other hand as if he was unaware of doing so. I found that I had actually come to deplore people who smoked, but in a way I also felt guilty of this because I often thought I ought to be more tolerant of everyone's tastes and idiosyncrasies.

Zeus had obviously heard this last thought of mine because he gestured vaguely with his hand to Sean, and made his cigarette go out. When Sean went to take another puff he found that there was nothing there *to* puff, and he looked at the cigarette as though it had betrayed him. Zeus chuckled slightly.

"You are invisible aren't you?" I asked him. Another voice suddenly interrupted me.

"Who are you talking to?" I could not see who had said this because she was behind Zeus, but it served as evidence that Zeus had indeed made himself invisible to everyone else, and he stepped aside so that I could see who it was. A lady of about twenty-five...

"Twenty-seven," Zeus said.

...was standing there, wearing a drab grey suit which clashed unfortunately with her shoulder-length blonde hair. She wore a curious, rather than confused, expression, and unless it was a mirage, she was almost grinning.

"Er, no-one," I answered. This answer seemed to suffice as an excuse for most things nowadays.

"It's all right – I talk to myself too. Oberon Furrow isn't it?" She extended her arm.

"Yes," I said. We shook hands.

"Miranda Stevens. Journalist."

"Journalist?" I repeated, suddenly launching into panic mode. But why would they have decided – after all this time – to do a story on my work with the chancellor? What relevance had it now? Had she seen me appear out of nowhere in the street?

"Yes – I was wondering..." she began, but I was saved the tension when Sean interrupted, pushing a bunch of files between us.

"Ah!" he said, "Hello. You must be the auditor. Will the others be here soon?"

"No, she's..." I said, but he interrupted again:

"I know you're a fast worker, Oberon," he said, "But we have a

lot of work on the cards."

"Yes, they'll be here," said Miranda, "They're just... they're just catching up with me in their cars. I run to work, you know."

I walked away as quickly as I could to the bookkeepers' offices. Zeus followed. The room was crowded - easy to get lost in, I thought. The people were standing between the partitions, and I could barely squeeze past them as I walked down to my partition. Zeus of course, had no trouble in going through them or over them.

"Hi Oberon," came a voice from behind me. I turned around and saw the face of the man I knew as John Eaves. He was not smiling, had wrinkles around his mouth and bags beneath his eyes and it seemed as though he had only said hello to me because he was bored.

"Hello John."

After that ordeal with the journalist, the morning seemed to go very well indeed. The auditors were posing no problem. In fact I had barely seen them throughout the day. They were probably starting on the ground floor of the bookkeeping office, where most of the activity was going on that morning. I was sure that they would find no problem with my database recording, because most of it had been done by Zeus which would no doubt have been perfect.

I managed to agree with Zeus that when I coughed, Zeus should put the next five records in the database automatically. It was a good system, and gave me time to think about things - a break from the relentless, almost bureaucratic, monotony.

In the coffee break there was a mass exodus for the lobby. I followed behind at the end.

"Where are you going?" came Zeus's voice when I had reached the door.

"To get some coffee."

"Why?" he said. I thought for a moment.

"Oh yes," I said, just as the last trickle of workers had left the room. "I don't need to do I?" A cappuccino appeared in my hand.

"Why queue?" said Zeus.

I drank the cappuccino as I walked back to my partition. When I reached it I was about to sit down in my seat when I noticed that someone was already doing just that.

"Oh," the woman in the seat said, "hello."

"How did you get here?" I replied. Miranda was sitting there, her legs crossed casually, her mouth exhibiting an almost imperceptible smile.

"I lied about being a journalist," she said, "I really am one of the auditors."

"So saying you were a journalist, then... was just some kind of managerial test?"

"Yes. I'm surprised you didn't get it actually."

"Well," I said, wanting to defend myself, "I am glad about that, you know. Whenever I hear of journalists nearby, I get quite worried, because of... Well, anyway, this is... this is my partition," I explained somewhat awkwardly. There were little other ways to explain this fact, after all.

"Oh I'm... ever so sorry," she said, standing up. Her voice was slow and smooth, "Did they not tell you? You've been moved upstairs."

"Upstairs?" I repeated, "I wonder why they've done that. Well, may I collect my paperwork please?"

Zeus decided he would drift behind Miranda and make certain finger gestures with his hands above her head. I could not help but laugh.

"What's funny?" she said. She turned around, and of course, she did not see anything suspicious.

I opened the bottom drawer of the desk and saw all of the cash books and ledgers I had been using. I stepped towards the drawer, but tripped on the desk's metal support bar. The drawer shut and I was knocked onto the desk with such potency that I fell onto it, sending the cappuccino hurtling through the air as I slid right across the desk, hitting the computer and the desk lamp and the piles of paperwork on the way, causing them to crash to the ground in a succession of sickening thumps.

"Oh!" Miranda exclaimed. Now, people were returning from the lobby, and were rushing from elsewhere in the office to see what on Earth was going on. I could feel my face flushing with embarrassment. And making matters worse was Zeus, who stood next to me, guffawing wildly.

"It's not funny!" I snapped at him, before suddenly realising what dreadful pain I was in.

"Well I'm not laughing," Miranda said with her hands clasped to her mouth. Zeus waved a hand at the whole scene. Miranda took her hands away from her mouth and said: "Gnihgual ton mi ho!"

I found myself saying: "Ynnuf ton sti!" without having any choice. Zeus was still standing with his hand outstretched, no longer laughing. Then, I found myself suddenly floating upwards, sliding back onto the desk backwards, and all the piles of paperwork and the desk lamp and the computer wreckage and everything else that had been on the floor with me assembled itself back neatly to where it was originally. I slid off at the end, the cappuccino flew straight back into my hand, the drawer re-opened, and I was finally stood firmly on my two feet, injury-free.

"You can reverse time?" I muttered to Zeus who had just walked back up to me.

"Of course I can," he said, "I'll help you pack up your things." Zeus made a briefcase appear next to the desk where Miranda couldn't see it. The cash books and ledgers in the drawer had vanished.

"Oh," Miranda said, "I could have sworn there were documents inside that drawer."

I smiled and took hold of the briefcase.

"I have everything ready," I said, "Which is my new partition?"

"Er..." Miranda hesitated, "4C I think."

"Thank you."

Zeus and I made our way away from the puzzled Miranda to the stairs at the back of the room. There was nobody watching, and so Zeus allowed us to take the higher dimensions to get to partition 4C. In other words, we vanished and I instantly found myself upstairs. I found that 4C was in the middle of the room, but the contents of the partition were identical to the one downstairs. I was opposite another partition and would be in full view of the person working at it. It was John Eaves.

"Hi," I called across. John looked up.

"Hello Oberon," he said in a dull tone and continued working.

"This is a free partition isn't it?" I asked, in case Miranda had mis-delivered the message. John merely grunted in response. I took it as a yes.

I was grateful to Zeus for getting me out of the otherwise humiliating situation downstairs, and I had to smile to myself about

how amusing it seemed on the outset. But now, I would have to be more careful. With Mr. Eaves able to see me just across the way (despite his apparent apathy), I might be spotted doing suspicious things. I would have to tell Zeus this, but I couldn't talk to him now because to John I would be talking to thin air.

I walked to the back of the room and went behind a filing cabinet with Zeus.

"Yes you're right," Zeus said.

"Right about what?" I replied.

"We need to be more careful with John opposite us."

"I haven't said that yet." There was a slight pause. "Oh... oh yes! I needn't have come here to talk to you privately... I still can't get it to sink in about your being able to read my mind."

"Er..." Zeus said, pointing distinctively to something behind me. I turned around to see what it could possibly be.

"Talking to the filing cabinet are you?"

How unfortunate could you get? It is not a good idea to be found in embarrassing situations during an audit. It is especially not a good idea when one is on one's second day of a new job. And even when there isn't an audit, and one isn't on one's second day of a new job, it is still far from a good idea to be caught without reason apparently conversing with an upright metallic cuboid. It was Miranda.

"Miranda," I said, "Hello. I didn't see you there." I looked back at the filing cabinet briefly, to see that Zeus had vanished. I looked around the immediate surroundings for a moment, but I could not spot him. The noise of the workers on keyboards suddenly greeted my ears.

"So the filing cabinet..." Miranda said, with an expression of deep, meaningful speechlessness. Her eyes were closed momentarily, "...can read your mind?"

I tried to fake a laugh at what was an absurd idea. "Read my mind?" I said, probably too weakly, "A filing cabinet? No... I was just..." I was looking around nervously waiting for Zeus to reverse time again and save me before I had to think of a plausible excuse, but nothing happened.

"You were..." Miranda prompted me. There was a pause. Still nothing.

"I have work to do," I announced, and was about to walk off

when Miranda called me back sharply.

"You know, sometimes I think I'm the one who's going mad..."
"Oberon," came another voice. I turned to see that once again, I had been saved by Sean, the boss. "I trust you've finished the bookkeeping of... which company?"

"HC Hydraulics," I said, "Yes I have. And I've started the new bookkeeping of Masterful Minds Magical Supply Stores Inc. Fred gave me the work."

"Oh!" said Sean, his face brightening, "Starting another already," he said to Miranda's face, emphasising this favourable point, "Well done. Keep it up." I smiled. Sean didn't, but he was evidently pleased to find something with which to impress the auditors. He turned to talk to Miranda, conveniently closing me off from my own conversation with her. I took the opportunity to scarper, returning to my post at the computer. Zeus was there, sitting on the desk. I noticed that John was away from his partition somewhere.

"So why didn't you reverse time this time?" I asked, severely.

"Ha!" said Zeus, "Is that all I'm good for? I have come here to learn what it's like for you to exist in this temporally aware world, and to cope with situations with the benefit of a time dimension, and it is time you learnt to fend for yourself without relying on good old Zeus just to reverse time and everything to be OK. You wouldn't want to be seen as abusing my apparent 'powers' - taking advantage - would you?"

"No," I said, feeling slightly ashamed, "You're right. You're definitely right." I felt I was being selfish, and I certainly did not want to be selfish if I could help it.

"Indeed," said Zeus, smiling. I saw that John was returning, so I set back to work on the computer.

Lunch time came quickly, and Zeus and I found ourselves alone in the upstairs office of the bookkeeping rooms. Though on reflection, if John had been there he would probably have been completely indifferent anyway, having taken no notice of what I had been doing (or not doing) during work.

"So, to Paris?" I said.

"Are you absolutely sure you don't want to go somewhere else?" Zeus asked, "Venice? Prague? San Francisco? Mars?"

"Mars?" I repeated.

"Yes," Zeus answered, "The view from Olympus Mons is truly awe-inspiring. Or we could go to Venus if you prefer. Or anywhere. It doesn't really matter."

"I think..." I said, "for the moment... I'll stick to Paris."

"You know," said Zeus, "I often wonder about how decisions in this time dimension of yours – even small decisions – can affect things that are so much larger. But anyway, I say again: are you sure?"

"Positive," I said, "One shock at a time."

"OK. Fair enough. Off we go." Zeus waved his arms spectacularly and the next thing I knew I was sitting in the familiar seat of the Parisian café once more overlooking the River Seine onto the Eiffel Tower. The waiter, Pierre again, approached us.

"Bonjour messieurs," he said delightedly.

"Bonjour," we chorused. Zeus had already conjured up the Translator Device. I could not speak French independently, at least not with the correct accents. I thought that Pierre most probably suspected us of being French ourselves - residents, even, of Paris, that had recently moved in from elsewhere, or had only just discovered this charming café.

This time we ordered an omelette dish. It was quite delicious, so delicious in fact that neither of us spoke between mouthfuls. Pierre returned to collect the plates just at the right moment.

"Délicieux; merci," I complimented it as Pierre took the plates away.

"Divine," Zeus said, "Anyway, should we be going?"

"No. It isn't time yet. Show me some more mental tricks."

"They're not tricks," Zeus complained, "They are certainly not tricks. They are merely ways of playing with science."

"OK," I said. "Play with science then if you would please."

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

"What do you mean? Of course it is. You make it sound as though something terrible will happen otherwise."

"Very well. Think of a number."

"Any number?" I said.

"Eighty-six."

"Just a moment I haven't thought about it yet!" I protested.

"Oh sorry. But that would have been the number you'd have

chosen, I know. OK, I'll wait this time."

So I could think of any number I wanted. Forty-four? No, fifty-eight.

"Right I've thought of one."

"Fifty-eight," Zeus declared triumphantly, "But you were toying with forty-four I could tell."

"Amazing."

"Strange that you humans always seem to pick positive real integers below a hundred, but nevertheless... I can do card tricks if you wish," and Zeus conjured up a pack of cards. "Pick a card." He presented the pack to me. I took one, and no sooner had I seen that it was the king of clubs did Zeus declare:

"King of clubs." I smiled and returned the card to the pack.

"This time you're going to pick the seven of spades."

I took a card. Sure enough, it was the seven of spades. Zeus made the cards vanish, except that the seven of spades was still left in Oberon's hand. Zeus took it, and pushed it through the middle of the table.

I heard a screech – an abrupt cry of pain. I looked round. A second passed, and my eyes latched onto a table in the distance. A woman seemed to have fallen off her chair, and was pulling herself back up clumsily.

"Look," I said quickly to Zeus, pointing at her, "its the auditor, Miranda." As Zeus looked on, Miranda made a hasty retreat, disappearing from view as she was obscured by a nearby hedge.

"Lets go," said Zeus with a tone of urgency. We got up from the table and Pierre arrived to give me the bill. On the back of the bill was the seven of spades.

After paying, we proceeded to walk around to the convenient corner that wed discovered on the previous visit. There was nobody there, so without further ado, Zeus transported us back to Yenom where it was slightly colder than in Paris, but nothing drastic.

As I had expected, the auditors found no problem with my work. In fact they found it positively excellent. They remarked at how fast I was working and how I managed to sustain the one-hundred percent accuracy. It made me smile, not least because Zeus was floating over one of the auditor's heads the whole time he was talking.

In the final part of the day I was thinking to myself about all of

the things Zeus could do. I knew that it was possible for him to do these things, like reading minds, telling the future, seeing and walking through obstacles, because of the ten dimensions. But how exactly did it work? I suppose I had avoided thinking about it or asking Zeus before because I thought it would be too complicated for me. I could not deny that I was good at mathematics which was why I was an accountant in the first place, but science was slightly beyond me. I decided to pose such questions to Zeus at a later date (partly in case he had been reading my mind and thinking of insisting that he explain).

In all, those times were most probably the happiest I had spent in my life. With Zeus around, amusing events and risky tricks with science were commonplace, and I always knew I was safe. I almost felt invincible. I still hadn't found out what Miranda had been doing in Paris, but what did it matter? I said to myself, though, that I would have to be careful not to turn selfish, a crime I might have been guilty of that very morning.

At the end of the day I made my way to the entrance hall, where again I met Sean.

"Sorry you had to join us at these hectic moments with auditors," Sean said.

"That's no problem."

"How did it go, by the way?"

"Fine. Everything was absolutely fine."

"Great. We'll meet you. Tomorrow. Here. We can get the necessary files and then be off to Accounting Direct. Here's the address. On this piece of paper." Sean got the piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Oberon.

"Thanks," I said in reply.

"Goodbye."

Zeus and I went outside the building but found that it was far too crowded for us just to transmogrify ourselves back home. There were no abandoned telephone boxes or bus shelters down this street either.

Just then, Sean came out of the building, carrying his briefcase under his arm and his jacket over it. He spotted me engrossed in the dilemma.

He stared at me for a moment, squinting because of the sun, but then strode off with nothing to say.

"So whats your plan, Oberon?" Zeus said.

"Nobody would notice would they?" I answered. Nobody seemed to have noticed that I had been talking to thin air, after all.

"I must go now; I shall leave you at your home. Valedictions."

Without time to reply, I found myself back in my living room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On arrival at Yenom Accounting, the hyper dimensional being and I saw Sean (through the glass front door) walking up and down the entrance hall in the greatest of agitation: he was puffing on a cigarette wildly, he had his collar upturned and his hair was a mess. I noticed that Susan the secretary was sitting at her desk occasionally calling something to Sean, whereupon Sean would shake his head and become even more agitated.

Zeus was raising his eyebrows as if he could hear what they were saying. In fact, I thought, he probably could. I pushed open the glass door and went inside, followed by Zeus a second afterwards. They were speaking quite loudly:

"In the filing cabinets at the back of the financial accounting office, second floor?" Susan suggested to Sean.

"No..." Sean said back, ruffling up his hair and taking another puff of his cigarette.

"Might it be on top of any of the filing cabinets?"

"No..."

"Er..." I said, wanting to help. I was not heard.

"Inside somebody's desk?" said Susan.

"Nooo..." Sean whined, now walking with more force with his feet.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked, a little timidly.

"Yes," said Sean shortly, "Yes. I have lost the balance sheet and files that Max gave me when we had the conference, and I've lost my sanity to go with it. I need those papers for our auditing ordeal today."

I wasn't quite sure how I could help. When I had almost decided on saying 'can I help you search?' I suddenly found that something had appeared in my hands. Zeus winked. I edged over to the coffee machine, and swiped my hands over it as if taking the pieces of paper from it.

"Ah ha!" I said, faking relief and triumph, "Here it is! On the coffee machine." I produced the balance sheet that Zeus had given me, and Sean's eyes became visibly dilated.

"Brilliant!" he said eventually and the cigarette dropped out of his mouth. He didn't bother to do anything about it and proceeded instead to take the balance sheet from Oberon, "Cheers."

"You must have left it on the coffee machine when you were showing Cedric that the coffee machine wasn't working, when it was, in fact."

"Cedric?" Sean repeated, looking up from his checking of the balance sheet.

"Matthew, I mean. Matt Maticks."

"Hmm," said Sean, "OK, Oberon, collect up your paperwork and well get off to Accounting Direct."

"Directly," I said.

I went to the bookkeeper's office, looked around, and when I was sure nobody was looking, Zeus made the necessary files appear in my hands. I came from the office and made it to the door quicker than Sean, who had already begun walking to it.

"That was quick," he remarked, but with no particular interest. We got outside. "Where's your car?" Sean asked.

"My car?" I said, "Why d'you ask?"

"Just wondered where on Earth you managed to park 'round here. I can never find a damned parking space near this place. Have to go round to one of the other streets. Well never mind. See you there."

Sean wandered off with his hands firmly in his pockets. Zeus and I, meanwhile, walked back into the entrance hall of Yenom, past Susan who was packing up some things into her bag at her desk, and into the bookkeeping office again. Zeus transported us straight to Accounting Direct.

"You didn't even know where it was!" I said.

"Of course I did. How would I have got here otherwise?"

Yes – I was *still* struggling to get used to it all. Anyway, we were now standing in the entrance hall of Accounting Direct, which was a smaller hall with entirely white walls, a tiled white floor, and a white ceiling. There were no lights on in the room, but with the sun shining through the glass door and the windows, it was almost blindingly bright. There were more people around desks in this hall – more secretaries, in other words – than at Yenom.

Zeus approached the nearest one. She was completely unaware of his presence, of course. It gave me quite a shock when Zeus pushed his hand straight through the woman's head as if he was a ghost in one of the movies. It shocked me even more to see Zeus lifting up her telephone receiver, just like they often do in ghost films. He was

taking some pleasure in it, I could tell. The secretary was thoroughly engrossed in typing on her laptop, but after a while she noticed that the receiver was in mid-air and let out a sharp scream. Zeus dropped the receiver back down on to the telephone set just before anyone had a chance to look round and see what the scream was for.

"What's the matter Tracy?" said a woman, probably barely twenty, chewing gum.

"The receiver," Tracy stammered, "It was floating."

"D'you wanna pill?" said another lady with wild bedraggled black hair, looking as if she had tripped over in a field of porcupines.

"No..." Tracy answered, quite shaken, "No I'm fine." She looked a little uncertainly at the telephone before continuing her work on the laptop. Zeus came back to where I was standing.

"You shouldn't be mean," I whispered, "Though I admit it was amusing."

"Thank you," said Zeus proudly, not making eye contact.

"Anyway we'll just wait here until the others arrive OK?"

"Eh?" said a man that had just walked straight into Zeus without knowing it, "What others?"

The man, probably in his late thirties, his brow perspiring, had a limp. He was obviously under the impression that Oberon was talking to him as he passed.

"Sorry, wrong person," I said, smiled and then walked in the other direction. The man limped over to the corridor opposite me without protesting further.

I had no need to wait for the others, however. Another man came from the corridor opposite and strode up to me quickly: a very young man with a blank expression, dressed untidily in a suit – his shirt hanging out, his jacket almost slipping off, his tie being loose, his collar slack and upturned and his shoes notably unclean. Not a good first impression, I thought, but the man didn't seem to care.

"Hey," he said, "You're from Yenom?"

"Yes," I answered, "I am. The others will be arriving shortly, but they're probably stuck in traffic. Accident on the underpass in Wand Street. I run to work, you know."

"Cool. And your name?"

"I'm Oberon Furrow."

"Cool," he said. I'd been confident that he wouldn't have heard

of me. "Let me get you some work – some of that 'auditing' to do," saying the word auditing as if it was an alien, technical thing. I could almost believe he didn't know what it was. The man escorted me down the corridor. "I'm Cal, by the way."

Cal opened a door midway through the corridor and showed me in to a small one-person office.

"Hey Cal," said a man behind the desk.

Oh no, I thought: not another. How is it, I reasoned, that 'hello' is shortened to 'hi' and then to 'hey'? Why is 'hello' so difficult to say? And with the depth and breadth of the English language, where there must be several synonyms for almost every adjective, why do they have to go and change the meanings of words that already exist? I had a theory: the word cool has one syllable; so does the name Cal. In fact, in the conversation I had just had with Cal I could only think of two words he had said with more than one syllable: 'Yenom' and 'auditing', of which the latter he was slightly afraid to say. So obviously the rule with these people was to speak in monosyllabic terms. I made a mental note.

Anyway, the man behind the desk got up and shook my hand enthusiastically. He was dressed in the same way as his mate Cal.

"Hey, I'm Chris," he said, "This is my room."

"Indebted to forge your acquaintance," I said.

"Uh, yeah," he replied, proceeding to show me what to do on the computer in terms of the auditing job. It was basically a case of verifying Chris's bookkeeping of a certain company. It was going to be laborious, and if Zeus did it, how would I explain the speed? And what would I be doing instead?

When the explanation was finished (it was pretty straightforward anyway), Chris and Cal left the office.

"Hey Nicole!" Cal called to someone, shutting the office door behind him. I flinched at that word again.

Zeus sat on the desk, and I got to work.

"Couldn't you do something interesting?" said Zeus.

"Did you not hear my thoughts just before they left?"

"Yes... I am working on it."

"Right then." There was another long pause until Zeus raised his index finger, his face lighting up.

"I have an idea," he said with cunning in his tone. I stopped

work to hear. "Look."

Zeus pointed to the corner of the room, and conjured up something that shocked me so much that I fell off the chair. When I had picked myself up and dusted myself down, I looked more closely at what Zeus had created: an exact clone of me.

"Hello," the clone said, unfolding his arms and walking towards me, "Zeus has conjured me up to do this boring auditing business. You'll find I'm very efficient, I trust."

"Right," I said, "Right. This is... incredible... incredibly weird..."

Zeus said something. I watched as the cloned Oberon sat down at the computer and set to work exactly as I had left off.

"Pardon?" I said.

"Where shall we go?" said Zeus.

"Well... I don't know. You mentioned Rome, New York, San Francisco and Moscow, if I remember correctly. We could go to one of those. Anywhere, I think, would be great."

"Rome?" Zeus repeated, folding his arms and looking at me as if I had no taste whatsoever, "New York? San Francisco? Moscow?"

"You suggested them!" I reasoned.

"That was for lunch. I wouldn't have wanted to take you far away just to have lunch." I glanced unnervingly at the cloned Oberon, who was beaver away at the computer, checking the database against the files and not questioning my arguments with Zeus.

"So where do you suggest?" I said, looking away from Oberon the Second.

"Somewhere extremely interesting." There was a silence.

"Such as?"

"Zirith?" The word sliced through me. Go to another planet? I was cautious. "Why not?" said Zeus.

"I... I don't know anything about it... I don't... I... I don't know what they look like... They'll look at me strangely..."

"Oberon," said Zeus, "you're worrying for nothing. As usual. Its all already been sorted out. You see, there is a system called the Corfizz Perception Engine. The invention makes sure that all life forms can only see each other in their own biological form. So the Zirithirans will see you as if you have the biological form of a Zirithiran, and you will see all of the Zirithirans as if they have the same

biological form as yourself – like humans."

"Really?" I said, "Is that why the Zirthirans seem to look computerised?"

"Indeed it is. The Perception Engine is evolving all the time, so they're getting more and more realistic as they develop it."

"Then what are we waiting for?" I said.

In an instant, the familiar planet Earth left me, and an alien civilisation – all rather too quickly and entirely without fanfare – took its place...

Incredible. We had appeared on what seemed to be a pedestrianised square. Buildings towered above us on the sides of the square – buildings that seemed to be maintained exquisitely, made of some sort of metallic material, and in places, a kind of liquid glass, flowing and distorting the view of inside. There were few windows, however. And even stranger, there were no people...

"Wait for the Perception Engine to kick in," said Zeus, "Sometimes it takes a while. Here's the Translator, incidentally." He produced the Translator and handed it to me.

"Thanks."

A shape emerged on the horizon. It was a sort of pentagon, with curved sides, and it was hurtling towards me. As it got closer I saw that it was a seemingly benevolent structure, consisting of a roof shaped like a warped tiled pyramid, which was supported by curving red metal strips attached to a pentagonal frame at the base. Within this frame there appeared to be a black disc.

The thing halted abruptly when it reached me. It hovered for a moment, then swung back, and launched itself at my head. I put out my hands in defence, but the circular base struck too quickly – and everything went black.

"That wasnt a solid base," said Zeus, who I suddenly found was standing next to me in the blackness, "That was a wormhole. It slid itself over you as though you were trying on a sweater."

It made sense. I wondered why I wasnt feeling woozy. And strangely, though the surroundings looked black, I could still see Zeus – probably one of his tricks.

"The Corfizz Perception Engine," came a voice, "detects that this is your first visit abroad."

"I've been abroad before," I said, somewhat timidly.

"Abroad means to another planet, here," Zeus explained quietly.

"The initialisation of the engine," the voice continued, "will take a few minutes. Since you are the first of the *Homo Sapiens* species to use the Engine, you may experience adverse effects for which we have not previously accounted. If you wish to opt out of the process, please say now."

I looked at Zeus. He mouthed go on.

"No," I said.

"Thank you for your custom. Please wait..."

The little structure had reappeared at my feet, not in front of them though, but intersecting with my legs! As it rose upwards, the blackness slid away, and was replaced with the ground and the surroundings in which I had stood before the wormhole took me away. It looked almost as though it was a brush, painting me and the scene onto a black canvas. The light from Zirth seemed to be cast on me, with growing intensity, like stage spotlights, until the structure finally came through my head, and whisked off into the sky.

People. Yes – there were now people. A steady stream of them, and yes – it might just have been as though I were in a city square back home. They had that slightly 'unreal' look about them too. I had a similar feeling to the one you get upon watching computer generated scenes in movies – it's the minor imperfections that seem to amplify the awareness of unrealistic occurrences. But they were all unique. It wasn't as though they were computer game non-player characters, all based on set models. They walked, they spoke to each other, they used unusual hand-held devices, they carried shopping, smiled and laughed.

Similarities with humans had to end somewhere. Yes – right after 'carried shopping'. Did people really smile and laugh in the street this often? This wasn't a human public space as I knew them – this was like some loosely-connected community, an entire microcosm just in this square. People nodded and smiled to acknowledge their comrades' presence, and would help each other out carrying their bags. The hand-held devices they were carrying had a little light that would flash green as people passed each other, as though they too were greeting one another.

"They're exchanging data, actually," Zeus explained, "If the interests of the people, which are stored on their devices, match, they

synchronise – synchronise maybe their music, their photographs (those things take photos automatically of anything interesting), and all the information that may be useful to the person. In fact, in this entire square, and beyond, these devices form a powerful network – the nodes of a (quantum) supercomputer – and transfer any knowledge, any data, music or media that any in the network want. The Zirthirans are like the nodes in the network their hand-helds are – they form part of a community, combining all their strength to get powerful results.

I looked on in awe, watching the community at work. "I'd get sued on the spot transferring music, or anything, between strangers so prolifically."

Zeus laughed, as though such a thing could not be true. "Then your society does not value the freedom of creativity, and knowledge."

"Hello," a young man said to me, smiling, "You look a bit lost. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

The man looked at his portable...

"J'nanator," said Zeus, "in the Zirthiran tongue."

...And saw a red light.

"You should get one of these," he said, smiling more broadly, "You'll find your way in no time. Directions," he said, to the J'nanator, "to the swimming baths please."

He looked from the machine to the people around him, his eyes looking as though they might be tracking the path of the information through the network as they wound their way to him. He pressed a button, and two lenses, with multi-coloured spiralling streaks across them, were ejected from the device. He took them, and then drew out the frames of a pair of spectacles from his pocket, before mounting the lenses inside. He put the glasses on and pocketed his J'nanator. But he took only a step forward before he stopped abruptly again and pressed his ear with his fingers, getting a voice message.

"Hello?" he said, then took the J'nanator from his pocket and looked at the screen, "Ah yes, thank you for the picture of the swimming baths. I'm new here too," he said as an aside, to me, "Let me get one for you," he said back to the caller, and finally headed off for a building on my left.

Every now and again, a wormhole would appear - that is, a circular suspended 'disc' would enlarge from thin air. A person, or

more often, a group of people, would step out of it, and others would step in, and the wormhole would close. Vehicles such as the one I had seen before drove across the far side of the square occasionally, but not as frequently as there were wormholes.

"Let me just translate these signs for you," said Zeus.

Suddenly, I could now read the signs above the doors of each building in English rather than Zirthiran. For example, I could see the 'Corfizz Wormhole Support Centre', the 'Corfizz Hyperstore', the 'Corfizz Hyperspace Supply Store'.

"So is everything Corfizz?" I asked.

"Not at the moment," Zeus replied, "but in the future of Zirth, it will be. Remember it's not a company like you have on Earth. It's more of a label – just a global community brand name."

"I see."

"Let me show you something," said Zeus. He stopped a man walking up towards us on the street. "Excuse me. We're doing a little street survey. Could you tell me, have you heard of the planet Earth?"

"I have, yes," said the man.

"And what do you think of it?" said Zeus.

"Well... not a nice place, obviously." He frowned, as though the subject pained him. "Are you not from these parts?"

"No, we're not," Zeus answered, "We're from a parallel universe you see."

"Oh really?" the man said, genuinely interested.

"Yes. Thanks for your time."

"No worries at all."

We walked down a street. I was greeted several times. There were a number of red lights flashing out at me, as though urging me to enter the community as a matter of importance. The people were not all looking straight ahead, or at the floor, they were looking all around them as they walked. It was just the way Zeus had behaved when I had first met him but now there was a whole civilisation of them! I voiced this observation to Zeus.

"Well yes," Zeus said, "You see, the people of Earth aren't at all like the rest of civilisation. I suppose there are seven thousand million light years separating you."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"That's not much," said Zeus, "But it's enough for you not to

have discovered the others. The thing is, Zirthirans simply have more powerful brains, and although they've only been in existence for one-thousand two-hundred years, they've advanced further than Earth people have in... over ten thousand! Similar with the other eleven advanced civilisations in the visible universe."

"If all these civilisations are so much more advanced, doesn't that mean their weaponry has advanced so much that they could be in a sort of Cold War situation with each other? I'm sure I read something about this in a waiting room..."

"Shh!" said Zeus, "Not so loud. Remember I said that Zirthirans have entirely different brain systems? Not only are they faster but they are also geared into something you Earth people know little about: peace. While it may be customary for biological life on Earth seven thousand million light years away to grow armies and kill others that oppose them, this is not how the mind of a Zirthiran would work. They would not dream of exploiting the elements, like uranium, for nuclear weapons. They'd not dream of harming anything alive. You have to be careful what you say around here, Oberon. They are very sensitive. Do you like action films?"

"Er... yes they're all right."

"Well if you showed, say, the latest James Bond film to a Zirthiran, they would almost certainly pass out at the sight of the violent content. The fact is, that crime and murder on Zirth is virtually non-existent."

There was silence for a while as I reflected.

"Nobody smokes either," I pointed out.

"No. They're not stupid."

"There's no litter either."

"Zirthirans are a proud species," Zeus explained, "The people of Earth seem to have little regard for the state their planet gets into. Even if it means they're killing themselves in the process."

We had now reached another square. This one had a fountain in the centre of it, but not a fountain of water, but of a lilac fluid. There were many vacant public benches next to it, of a sleek, curved ornate design, one of which we sat down on. Its highly polished wood was in a pristine condition. Yes – it certainly made you proud to live in the place when you had such pleasantries.

"Also," Zeus continued, "they have recently developed the

medicinal technology to grant their inhabitants immortality."

"Immortality?" Zeus had made it sound casually simple.

"Yes. It involves advanced quantum manipulation. The Zirithirans can – to a limited degree – expand and contract the effects of quantum physics, you see."

"Right," I said, starting to feel that the conversation would lose me here, but before I could change the subject, somebody handed me a piece of paper:

"Here's an article about it," she said, walking off.

"Er, thank you," I said, not sure if she heard. I glanced from the paper to the woman and back again. The title: 'Quantum manipulation: the physics of immortality'.

"Read it some time," said Zeus. "Go on. What was it you were going to change the subject to?"

"Well, you said you could see the future of Zirth, didn't you? So can you see the future of Earth?"

"Of course," said Zeus, in a dark tone.

"What is it?"

"You don't really want to know."

"Why not? How terrible is it?"

"Too terrible, I fear, to discuss on Zirth. If we were overheard, people might start feeling a little queasy."

"I see." I was starting to feel a little queasy myself, not to mention shaky and depressed. "Shall we go back? I'm getting nervous."

"Nervous?" repeated Zeus. I was shivering. I don't know why. Everyone here looked and acted in an extremely friendly way but the fact that I was so far away from home, I suppose, made me feel nauseous. I could see the sun in the sky... but it was not the Sun. It was notably larger, and more luminous. The sky was bluer. "That sun is called Heliozhen," Zeus put in.

"Hm?" said Oberon, "Let's go." I stood up. Zeus followed suit after a pause, evidently reluctant.

"Are you sure? We could get a bite to eat..."

"I'm not hungry. We'll come back here another time. For sure."

"As you wish."

Zeus transported us seven thousand million light years across the universe in a single instant. We were back in the office of

Accounting Direct in England, in the Northern Hemisphere of the planet Earth in just this one of so many other trillions of solar systems... and, I realised, universes...

Dizzy, I seated myself. My clone was typing furiously at the computer still. It was three o'clock. Somehow, time didn't matter to me any more. Three o'clock?

"I put us forward a few hours," Zeus explained. I was getting dizzier now. When I was young, with all those ambitions you get when you're young – becoming famous, setting up fantastical schemes and projects to get yourself rich, or to inspire people, or to become a celebrity, or solve the world's myriad problems – I would never have imagined myself sitting in this office in this building, watching a clone of myself doing my work for me, with a ten dimensional god that could tell the future and read minds that had just transported me to the far reaches of the universe... it was just so much to take in.

"Do you want to go home?" said the ten dimensional god.

I looked at Zeus. "Home? Yes please. But... what about - him?" I gestured towards my clone, who was beavering away at a hard-to-follow pace.

"He'll do all the work, and I'll fix it so that when he's finished, and walked out of this building, he disappears and all of the memories get put into your brain. How does that sound?"

"Fine. Yes, fine thanks. That sounds... great," I said indifferently.

"You'd like to be alone at home wouldn't you?"

"I would. Quite correct. Somehow, it seems that this – this life – this accounting business – somehow, it doesn't seem to matter."

"I'll send you home." Zeus smiled. The distant sound of my clone's typing faded.

The next thing I knew I was lying in bed back home. The irony of my being on the bed made me feel that it could all have been just a big dream, and it had certainly felt like one when I had been on the planet Zirth. It was incredible to contemplate, for want of the brainpower to concoct more stunning imagery at a time like this. I was the first ever man to have gone to this alien civilisation and to have learnt about it. Was it all a hoax after all? Was it all one big hallucination? It was too much for me to dwell on at the moment, and I closed my eyes to rest.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The curious feeling that I had when I awoke was so peculiar that I spent a full thirty minutes in bed contemplating it. I had a headache, and it was still night - eleven thirty-ish. At certain intervals I abruptly recalled events from the day. My clone. Zirth. The memories of my clone: they were now inside *my* mind! I could actually remember doing the work that the clone had done, and of walking out of Accounting Direct, even though I knew I had done none of it.

I was quite awake by now, with energy, but still with a headache. I'd not have anything to do until the morning. I wished that I might sleep through the rest of the night, but I was not tired any more. It seemed the whole pattern of my lifestyle had changed.

"It shall be as you wish," came the voice of Zeus around me, and suddenly I found myself yawning. On second thoughts, I supposed I *was* tired enough to sleep the night now.

"Thanks," I said quietly, as I lay down to get back to sleep.

It hit me almost immediately. Unlike the previous mornings, when I awoke that day, there were no singing birds to be heard. But even more strangely, was that I could hear no cars moving on the road outside. There was a frightening silence instead. For a while I savoured this silence. I got up.

I looked out of the window. It was as though I was staring at a television set, and somebody had muted the sound. A car was parked on the road, not to one side of it though, but actually on the road as if it had made an emergency stop. Perhaps it had broken down. I walked to the porch to check the post. Nothing. When I happened to glance out of the porch window I saw a man, standing on the pavement in a most unusual posture. One of his legs was outstretched in front of him. I stared. The man kept the same posture. His eyes did not avert from the same direction. Puzzled, I went out of the porch to investigate.

"Hello?" I called out. There was no reply. The man's lips were sealed, and he was retaining his posture as if he were a waxwork model. I did not dare to touch him to find out if he actually was a waxwork model. I peered up and down the street. There was a woman, in a very similar pose, and also another car that had stopped dead in the middle of the road.

It couldn't be... could it? I was reluctant to admit my inevitable

feeling... it was as though time had just... stopped.

I regarded the car in the same way I had the man. There was a driver inside the car, with a cigarette, static, in his mouth. His hand was fixed on the steering wheel; his foot on the accelerator pedal. He was not moving. Neither was the woman nearby who had a dog on a lead. Both were paralysed entirely.

I was quite shocked now. There was definitely something odd going on. Unless of course the whole village was playing a very well crafted practical joke on me, I was sure that this must have something to do with Zeus. Who else could make such things happen? I walked onward down the street, entering the café on the left.

Everyone inside was frozen. There was a man and a woman at one table, where the man held his fork poised before his open mouth, about to deposit some piece of chicken inside it, and the woman had her mouth open as if she had been speaking. There was another table where a man was eating alone, and seemed to be in the middle of a mouthful, never finishing it. There was a bar at the back, where a barman was transfixed also, in the middle of wiping a glass with a cloth. Their fixed, paralysed stares seemed frightening.

I dashed out. I was feeling hot inside somehow, and unnervingly agitated. Obviously there was very little else to do but call for help from Zeus. There was nobody I could think of that had the power to stop time than Zeus Ganymede, the ten dimensional god himself. So I hastened back to my driveway to call:

"Zeus?" I instinctively called up to the sky. But Zeus did not answer the call. "Zeus? Can you hear me?"

The words echoed ominously, making the silence and the stillness feel ever more threatening. I stepped slowly backwards, and then, ran back inside and slammed the door on the world. My breathing was heavy. My heart was beating fast. But why? I asked myself this question as I dropped onto the sofa. Where was Zeus? How would I best contact him? He had always been there before, every morning without fail, and he would always read my thoughts and answer my calls or wishes, just as he had done so the previous night to help me sleep. So where was he now?

"I'm here," said Zeus, popping into the room in front of the sofa abruptly. My hand found its way to my chest and my eyes closed as gestures of shock. But aside from the short-term surprise, the relief

of seeing Zeus was overwhelming. I had almost imagined being doomed to live in a frozen world for the rest of my life, but that was ludicrous.

"Is it?" said Zeus, "And what makes you think the world is not already frozen? Figuratively speaking, one could say that it is frozen in its ways."

"I presume it was you that stopped time here wasn't it?" I said, ignoring this cryptic remark.

"Yes," said Zeus, "naturally. I thought it was rather clever. While you were asleep I lifted you out of your dimension, halted the movement of this universe through time and then set you back down."

I raised my eyebrows at the thought of being removed casually from the universe and then put back again with time stopped.

"Well are you going to start time again?" I asked.

"Certainly not." I flinched. "At least not yet."

"Why?" I stammered.

"I wish to show you something. I wish to show you some possible futures of this planet, or some possible ways it could have been today."

"What do you mean?"

"I would like to take you beyond the dimension of time, and through this world's extension into the dimension of probability. I will show you parallel versions of Earth... in parallel universes..."

"P - p - parallel universes? Send me there?"

"Yes. I will see you later."

He gave a mesmerising stare, then held up his hands, clicked his fingers, and was gone.

And so was I. I was sent hurtling to infinity in a labyrinth of constantly changing irregularly coloured polyhedra set against an inky blackness... I was screaming constantly. Sickness and disorientation ensued, until, finally, it stopped abruptly as I hit the ground with a menacing thud.

I felt unusually unhurt. I found myself staring at a blue fuzzy material. I lifted my head and saw a blue carpet stretch in a thin band out into the distance. I felt as though the floor was moving beneath me too.

"Excuse me sir," came a voice from above, "Please could you

return to your seat?" she asked pleasantly.

I lifted myself from the floor to discover that I had been lying face down in the aisle of an aeroplane, and the air hostess was standing next to me waiting to get by. She did not seem angry. She just smiled. And the passengers - they were not laughing or joking about it or humiliating me - some of them were giving a confused expression, but there were no outlandish or embarrassing reactions.

"Yes," I said to the hostess, "I'm sorry about that," and I sat down in the seat closest to me, one by the window, with nobody sitting next to me. The hostess walked on and attended to some passengers further down.

The aeroplane was definitely moving, but it was not making a great deal of mechanical noise as it did so. In fact, I was tempted to postulate that the aeroplane was not moving and instead the sky and the world below was moving beneath us! I had no idea where we were headed, of course, or why I was there, and I was afraid to ask another passenger because they would surely think that I were mad. So I remained silent, my gaze fixed on the sky outside. After a while, there was a knock at the window.

A knock at the window? Absurd! I told myself not to be so silly.

There was another knock on the window.

I looked out of my window closer to see if I might determine what it was, but saw nothing unusual. It knocked again. It must have been something else, surely.

Another knock.

I looked at the other windows of the plane that I could see from my seat. I stood up to try to locate the source of the knocking. All I could see from them was the sky and the clouds, until the last window I came to. There was nobody sitting in the seats next to it so I approached it directly. Out of the window was a man, hanging on to something at the top of the plane, his hair ruffling wildly. He was using his other hand to knock furiously at the window. The man was also mouthing some words that I could not detect.

I had never seen this man before but I sat down next to him. This was not because I thought we could communicate, more because I was so shocked. If I was in my right mind I would have called out immediately for assistance, but in the circumstances, the world seemed

a very strange place indeed.

The man put up a finger as if to say 'wait a moment', and then he took a scrap of paper from his pocket. He pressed the paper up against the window of the plane so that I could see it. It appeared to be a telephone number. My mobile phone was in my jacket pocket as always, so I took it out and dialled the number. It was ringing. The man outside the window got out his mobile phone and answered it. The turbulent sounds of the wind was quite overpowering at the other end, but I could still just about hear the man's words.

"Who are you?" I asked, looking at him through the window.

"Never mind that," he replied, "go to seat forty-two."

"Why?"

"Why does it matter why? Just go there!"

"Don't you need help? I'll get the air hostess if you hang on."

"No don't bother!" the man shouted, "Get to seat forty-two!"

Don't bother? I was dumbfounded. This was simply ridiculous. Here was a man inexplicably hanging from outside an aeroplane, his life in mortal danger, and he is more concerned about having somebody go to seat forty-two than he is of his safety!

"Just go there!" the man said again, and he hung up. I watched as he tossed the mobile phone casually into the sky, letting it disappear from view in a nanosecond.

I was still in a state of shock, but the man just kept mouthing the word 'go!' repeatedly until I was forced to get out of my seat and proceed down the 'plane once more. The seat numbers were written on the backs of the seats above the in-built televisions. I looked at each one, and the people sitting in the seats took very little notice. When I finally reached seat forty-two, I sighed greatly.

Seat forty-two was my own seat.

I looked at it, half-expecting something to rise out of it, or perchance to see a hidden message in the stitching.

There was obviously something going on. People don't just hang outside of aeroplanes to tell you to go back to your seat. At least, I'd never heard of any.

I returned to the window that the man had been hanging from, and saw that he was no longer there. In his place, was Zeus, who was not bothering to hang by the window. He was just standing there in mid-air, laughing hysterically. I sighed at the joke. After a second or

two, Zeus vanished, leaving a cloud of smoke that merged in with the clouds.

It was not long after that the aeroplane landed, and I found that I did not need to walk through an airport to get back to the outside world. I was allowed to stroll away from the plane with no more business to attend to. I wasn't asked for a ticket, or for any money, or for an explanation of why I had suddenly turned up on a flight I hadn't booked, especially when it was in *mid-flight*. I wasn't searched by security guards or anything. It didn't look as though there *were* any security guards there. So I walked slowly and casually away from the plane, like the other passengers, towards a street, which was next to a row of decent-sized houses and a tower block or two.

The aeroplane was a relatively small one boasting a sleek design: the wings took a shape in likeness of the wings of a falcon.

A train was passing on the road. I stood and watched it. It was no ordinary train. This was an exceptionally long silver cuboid vehicle that had doors at regular intervals along it, a bit like an overground version of the Underground trains. How long was it? Just as the end of it passed by, I looked around at the other surroundings: a long line of large detached houses, all in prim and proper condition with spacious and well kept front gardens; some with climbing plants growing up their walls; fences separating them.

I walked down the street slowly. The air was unusually fresh and clean. And even more surprisingly, there was no litter on the ground whatsoever. Oh what a joy it was to see that! Was this Zirth again, I wondered? I passed a house where a man was watering a plant in the front garden.

"Good day," said the man as I passed.

"Good day," I said. The man was smiling. If it wasn't Zirth then it was certainly a parallel universe of some sort. This would never be happening in the world I knew. Even though it may have been common courtesy to say good day to anybody you saw at one time, nobody could be bothered back in my universe.

There was no traffic on the roads. Instead, a long train passed regularly. I noticed that nobody had a driveway or a garage in front of their house; they had front gardens instead; and I also observed that there were no cars parked on the sides of the road. Evidently, this train

was an advanced public transport system that had completely taken over. When it passed next, I noticed there was no driver!

I passed somebody else on the street.

"Good day," the man said courteously.

Eventually I came to an electronic control panel of some nature, which was just mounted on a highly polished chrome case protruding from a street lamp. On the top, there was a notice reading:

'District Transportation System - press red button for voice recognition service, or blue button for textual service.'

I pressed the red button.

"Welcome to the Street Interactive Transportation System," came a female voice from the control panel, "Please state the name of a street within the District, or use the 'change district' command to have options for transportation to another district. If you would like a list of the available street or county names, say 'list'. If you require overseas transport, say 'airport' and you will be taken to your nearest airport."

"Church Street," I said.

"Thank you. This journey will cost you twenty cents. Please insert money now."

Very reasonable, I thought. I dropped a twenty cent coin into the slot.

"Thank you," said the woman, "A train will be arriving shortly."

No sooner had she said this than a train came up alongside the road and stopped so that its centre was right next to me. The doors of the train opened in likeness of those of a subway. I stepped into the small carriage – chrome walls and exquisitely varnished complementary wooden seats created an instantly likeable, sleek look. There was nobody there, and I sat down in the middle of a seat.

"Doors closing," came a disembodied voice.

The doors shut, and in a moment, the train was off, building up a high speed pace in a matter of seconds, until I could see the houses rushing by in blurs outside the window. After no more than thirty seconds, however, the train stopped abruptly. But instead of the doors opening, the carriage I was in detached itself from the rest of the train and plummeted downwards into an underground tunnel where it sped at top speed around numerous meanders and bends in subterranean

tubes. I clutched the edge of the seat in shock. In a minute, the train halted, and I nearly slipped off the seat. It ascended, emerging right next to the sign that read 'Church Street'.

The doors opened. I disembarked. I watched as the train speed off down the road, leaving me to catch back my breath. When I looked at the sign that said 'Church Street' I noticed not only that it was polished, clean and rust-free (unlike the sign that I remembered), but that there was an electronic signal receiving device attached to it. This, I thought, must be for the train to find its route. I was sure it was a computerised system.

I walked down Church Street, though it was not Church Street as I knew it at all. Everywhere was free of litter, the buildings and plants were well maintained, there were seats along the roadside, and there were no intrusive adverts or propaganda on billboards. The weather was not too warm and not too cool, it seemed perfect, almost too good to be true. A woman was walking her dog down the road. Smiling, she said "Good day."

"Good day!" I replied, perhaps a little too cheerily, but I was feeling so much better in this universe I could almost complete the children's show-esque Utopia by cartwheeling along the pavement. I settled for the employment of a mild spring in my step, smiling and looking all around me, just like Zeus did, just like the Zirthirans did.

I was heading for my own house, whether it was by instinct, habit or curiosity, I did not know. But wait, would there be another Oberon living in it? I had had experiences with two copies of myself, of course, but here would be a situation where my other self would be completely unaware of what on Earth was going on, surely?

When I reached the house I saw that it was painted magnolia and looked ever so charming. Everything was kept up to a respectable standard, and instead of the driveway there was of course a front garden, which did look far better. How did I have time to maintain it though? Could people afford gardeners? Was I married?

I rang the doorbell.

"I'm sorry but I'm not in at the moment," said the doorbell, with what I recognised as my own voice, "Please leave a message after the tone."

I didn't leave a message. Well, what would I say? 'Hi, I'm you from a parallel universe and I was calling just to see if you were really

here'? How about 'Hello. A ten-dimensional god sent me to this alternative reality; god knows why; but I thought I'd drop as a surprise!'

Yes, I realise that this doorbell answering machine was an invention that I had actually thought about in one of my thinking times back home. It was quite incredible to see it in action and it was a pity I couldn't put it to any use at present.

I had an inspiration. It was a fleeting thought – it gave me that sort of whooshing sensation that combines fear with mischief, and curiosity with risk-taking.

I tried my key in the porch lock.

It fitted. Should I stop here? My curiosity was satisfied wasn't it?

I couldn't resist. I tried the key to the front door.

That worked too. I was in, and everything was different. For a start the decoration was stunning. There was actually wallpaper, which seemed to look far more sumptuous than plain old paint. The whole house felt brighter and cosier. I shut the door and went to observe the tidiness and cleanliness of the living room. It was simply fantastic. Devices and furniture were all of aesthetically-designed appearances – sporting sleek smooth curves and ergonomic interfaces, like the fireplace, which was circular and embedded in the wall, and the stereo in the corner, and the television, which seemed to arc around the corner of the room so that it was really more of an extension of the walls.

When I was aware of my mouth being open in awe, I shut it. I picked up the television remote, whose spongy morphological casing moulded itself around my hand in response. I switched the television on. The news.

"...became a successful author when she was twenty-two..."

I skipped straight to the next news item (habit: no point in listening to it when you haven't heard the beginning):

"Lidya Bright received the 2024 prize for progress in European Economic Relations and is recognised for her..."

I went to the television menu screen. The obsession with programmes about gardening, cooking, home improvement, reality TV, music and sport had been normalised and balanced with channels on... well, any subject you could care to mention. I noticed the physics

channel, the archaeology channel, the astronomy channel, the cosmology channel, the biology channel, the comedy channel, the computing channel and so on. It was exactly how television should be. There were even channels and programs devoted to teaching people how to learn a new language, master a certain skill or even take learning courses and examinations.

There was a click. It was the keys being turned in the lock of the door – I knew that sound anywhere. I quickly turned the television off and dashed up the staircase before I was seen. I looked down through the railings on the landing to watch the parallel universe version of me walk into the house. At first glance he looked much fitter, and happier. He walked straight into the kitchen before I could get a good look.

I began pacing up and down the bedroom with extreme agitation, hands sweaty as they always got in anxiety-provoking situations, but no situation had been as peculiar as this. I'd either have to face the music and explain what was happening to my alternative self, or I would have to escape. The escaping plan, I thought, was more favourable, but how would I do it? Going downstairs and taking the front door was just not an option.

My decision had to be made quicker because I could hear footsteps approaching. Oh no... they were coming up the stairs! I rushed about the room wondering what on Earth I was to do, and finally opened the window and climbed out onto the sill. I saw the drainpipe attached to the wall right next to the window, and not having any other plan (or time to construct one) I grabbed hold of it with both hands and slid down to the bottom. I landed on the lawn of the back garden, and then ran around the side of the house, through the gate and down the path, away from the house completely.

"Hello," a woman that was walking her dog said to me as she passed in the opposite direction. I smiled weakly. Unused to the frantic exercise, I leant against a hedge for a minute or two, and then took a stroll to the café.

It was very different. I remembered distinctly having met Zeus for the first time at this café. It stood out in my mind as the memory of a pivotal point in my life. It was indeed a time that had changed the way I acted forever, even though I was still, when it came down to it, an agitated worrier in disguise as an educated bachelor. Anyway, there

were less people at the café in this universe than my home universe, and of the people that were here, none, I noticed, were smoking. I stepped inside and began controlling my breathing slightly so that I became calmer.

On the wall was a map of the world. Aha! I thought to myself: this looks sophisticated, and not just the fact that a map of the world is in a café (it seemed like a good idea to me: add some culture and educational value to public places, instead of having them serve one purpose and one alone). I sat on the table next to it and regarded it, noticing for one thing that there were only four marked political regions. The countries that I was used to still existed, but were marked with semi-transparent dashed lines, which in the key, represented 'geographical boundaries'. However, so that it looked more uniform, the states of the USA and the regions of some other large nations were marked with dashed lines instead. It seemed, from the coloured key, that each of the four main nations were entire political entities, and had the same currency and an official language. I smiled at the fact that this was quite a sensible idea.

The countries were: the ACON (African COMmon Nation; currency, the international dollar), the USE (United States of Europe; currency, the euro), PACU (Pacific-Asian Cooperative Union; currency, the Yen) and the UFTSAC (United Free-Trading States of the Americas and Canada; currency, the dollar). Of course in my universe I knew of economic agreements and unions with similar names, but here they seemed more integrated and politically sophisticated.

"Can I get you a drink?" a smiling waitress asked me.

"Oh yes please," I answered, "A mineral water will be fine please."

The waitress nodded and her smile became even brighter. She turned and left. After a while, a man sat at the table opposite me, despite there being vacant tables elsewhere. He had a briefcase, which he laid against the table leg, and he doffed his bowler hat and spectacles and placed them on the table. He appeared to be in quite a good mood. He smiled in my direction; purely out of courtesy, of course.

"Good morning," I said, in an accommodating mood.

"Good morning."

Then the waitress returned and put a tall glass of mineral water on the table accompanied with a "here you are sir."

"Can I get you anything?" she asked the new man.

"I'll have a mineral water also please. Sorry to say that after you've just done one."

"That's quite all right."

I for one was marvelling at this continual politeness. I was much more used to people ignoring each other, not saying anything, never smiling and smoking all the time. Here was the complete opposite, and it seemed to me infinitely better. I didn't want to leave.

"Did you know," the man opposite me said, "that they've found a ternary black hole system in deep space?"

"No I didn't," I replied, "When was this?" I tried to sound interested, although I wasn't quite certain what a 'ternary' black hole system was. It was almost unbelievable to me that a complete stranger would sit at the café table next to me and begin discussing scientific developments! Obviously, I had no objection, and even hoped that more people would do the same.

"They found it last week," said the man, "with the James Webb Telescope of course."

"You saw it on television?" I asked.

"Naturally. I love the science channels. Makes you feel that you're being kept in the know – of how the world works, and everything, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "You wouldn't want to be kept in the dark about *that* would you?"

"So what do you think about the news of the creation of the super-colliding superconductor?"

I blushed ever so slightly. This was obviously something I should know about. What was it? The superconducting... what? I was only glad that the man gave me his opinion first.

"I think it's brilliant. It may prove M-theory. You never know what these particle accelerators are going to uncover do you?"

So that's what it was: a particle accelerator.

"No you don't," I said and took a large swig of mineral water. "Is that being built in Geneva?" I had vaguely recalled from somewhere that the main particle accelerating was done in Geneva, and wanted to make myself sound knowledgeable.

"A large portion of the funding is coming from there I think," the man explained, "but it's being built in Texas and some of the parts are being imported from Southern Italy."

Southern Italy? Southern Italy - in high-tech industry? What a reversal of fortune. I took another swig of mineral water. The man did so too. The differences between this parallel universe and the one I was used to were simply phenomenal, I kept thinking to myself. I finished the water quickly, set it back down on the table firmly and stood up ready to go.

"Goodbye," the man said.

"Goodbye," I called to him as I left the café.

"Oberon?" came an echoing voice around me in the street. It was Zeus. But I couldn't see him anywhere. "Oberon, I'm going to bring you somewhere else now. Brace yourself."

I didn't have much time to brace myself before I was whisked off into the blackness once more...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was happening again. I was flying through blackness, and the shapes returned - there were polyhedra, as before, constantly changing their size, shape and colour, sending me into a psychedelic confusion. There was no hint of the structure of a room, and no object that I recognised. I was falling, I could feel it, and felt a strange sensation as though I were tearing through the roof of a tent... I fell, and landed on the pavement.

It was dark. I was perspiring madly, and shivering in the cold and at the same time. The pavement was thin, and there were terraces of houses along the street next to me. On the opposite side of the street there were high-rise flats, all blocked together. The noise was close to unbearable. There was the noise of the car engines that were lined up in a traffic jam to my left; there was the noise of the car horns being blown; there was the noise of the wind; there was the rain pounding against my face; there were the shouts and bawls of teenagers and adults alike, trying to cause as much chaos as possible; and, most frighteningly of all, the unmistakable sound of a raid siren.

I didn't know which way to turn. The rain and wind felt like obstacles, constantly battering my face. I saw that all the cars were heading in the same direction, so I traipsed down the street with them, moving at a slightly quicker pace than they were. The air smelt strongly of the car fumes, and I was almost wading through litter and debris on the ground. I looked down at my feet and watched as twisted metal, squashed cans, crowbars, snapped rusty knives, shards of broken glass, dismembered stuffed toys, hub caps, smashed bottles, and the coagulation of what smelt like oil mixed with a spirit – maybe vodka, fused with congealed blood.

As I passed it, there came the sickening, frightening and characteristic sound of a dropping bomb.

My pace grew faster. The people in the cars became agitated: they blew their horns in anxiety and began shouting. Many leapt out of the vehicles and ran for their lives. After a thirty second panic, the bomb landed on the other side of town, and I stopped and watched the orange explosion on the horizon behind me that illuminated the sky many times brighter than the moon.

Transfixed to the spot momentarily, I felt a shiver up my spine. I turned and marched faster down the street. Some arguments came

into earshot, arguments of a man and a woman in the top floor of a flat. I walked on. I saw the sign that read 'Church street'. It was almost unrecognisable, just like the other parallel universe I'd been in, but here it was dirty and faded, and parts of it had snapped off. A rat was scuttling over it.

I seemed to be heading for my house again, but I could barely make out the forms of houses in the dark. And what would I do when I got there? I stopped. I decided I would find out where the cars were going. That's what I'd do.

"Got any spare change?" came a croaky voice from my left. A man with a beard, long hair and shaggy clothes emerged from the blackness of an alleyway.

"Er, no," I said, truthfully – I'd spent the last of it on the train journey and the drink in the other universe. The man looked skinny, possibly diseased. He held a pack of cigarettes in his hand. I dashed onwards towards the destination of the cars. Where were they all going? Moreover, why was there a war going on? Why had it extended *here*?

Suddenly there was a brief fulguration of light and a boom further down the street as part of a house exploded. Shards of glass and boulders of broken rubble tumbled down to the street below, colliding with the roofs of the vehicles.

Receptors were shocked out of their senses as stimuli bombarded them with messages. The central nervous system was indeed nervous. This was a crisis. Immediately a message plummeted down the nerves from the co-ordinated effectors, sparking the adrenal gland to life. It pumped out its adrenaline to excess, which began pulsing around the body. It forced the blood to race. It sent hot rushes of tingling down the spine. It widened the pupils aggressively to a virulent universe.

I ran.

My lungs inhaled harder. I did not care what happened now. My blood pumped fast, and faster and faster. I marched onward and onward in to the unknown.

I reached the end of the traffic queue - cars were turning into a massive car park. Families, elderly folk, couples, women with babies, all rushed out of their cars and ran with careless haste across the car park. All of them were carrying a suitcase or a bag, or some carelessly

thrown together sheets or valuables of theirs. They descended down a staircase on the edge of the street. There was a shelter over the staircase, a bit like a bus shelter, and I read the dirty sign that was nailed to it: 'Raid Shelter'. Had I perhaps been transported back in time – to the second world war? No – people didn't have cars in this abundance in those days.

"Quick!" came a voice in my ear. The light of a collapsed, flickering street lamp revealed the person as some form of warden. "Get in the shelter! What d'you think you're playing at?" Almost every other word he said was preceded by an obscenity.

I need not have walked down the staircase myself, for amongst the crowds I was more or less thrown down. It was a long staircase that wound around many times, and it was dark, getting darker as you went further into its depths. The walls were of stone, and echoed people's desperate cries and shouts. It was perishingly cold. Why would a raid shelter need to be this far down? And if I really was in my home county, why would one be needed?

Eventually I found the bottom, and it was simply a labyrinth of narrow corridors with bunk beds on either side of them. The only light came from naked bulbs lazily attached to the ceiling - indeed, as I turned right into another hallway, one of the lights came off the ceiling and shattered on the ground. I was running around aimlessly, not knowing where I was going or what I should do. I felt the need to find Zeus. Surely he wouldn't leave me in such a predicament? One thing was certain: there were no free beds for me to rest in.

Abruptly I tripped and hit the stone floor sharply. A pain shot up my leg. I squinted my eyes. I was sure that one of the children on these beds had put his or her foot out to trip me up purposefully, because the kids were now laughing. I picked myself up steadily, and brushed myself down with my hands. I glanced around at these kids: dirty, violent, obscene, and their mother not caring about a thing. Well, some things don't change.

I pressed forth through the maze. Most people were smoking in the shelter, even some of the children were being handed cigarettes. When I reached one particular corridor I had to stop and wait to avoid being suffocated in a group exhalation of smoke. Eventually I found another warden standing to attention against a wall.

"Looking for a free bed?" the warden said, with no sympathy.

"Yes," I said.

"Well you can't 'ave one," sneered the warden, "'Cos they're all taken. What bad luck. You'll have to sit on this cold stone floor. Those without a bed, you know – I see them freeze to death."

I sat down next to the corner wall of a junction, and I held my knees tightly in my arms. All I could hear was the racket being made by children and the racket being made by adults to shut them up so that they could make their own racket about what they were going to do about their safety. There didn't pass a second where there wasn't crying or swearing or fighting.

Suddenly, from above ground, there came an almighty boom that instantly made everyone in the shelter scream at the very top of their voices. In the explosion's wake there was the sound of distant crashes and burning as if the whole urban landscape above them was now in flames, and all civilisation was slowly tumbling down. More people began to cry. Including me. The echoes amplified the devastation.

"What was that?" I asked the warden.

"A – bomb, what d'you think? A nuclear bomb dropped in the city or something, I 'spect," the warden replied, shaking his head.

That might explain everything. This was nuclear war. And a nuclear bomb had perhaps been dropped somewhere nearby, rocketing its explosive power full in the face of all neighbouring towns and villages. It suddenly hit me full in the face. A nuclear war?

"So that means that everything will be flattened," I said hesitantly to the warden, "and we won't be able to go back up to the surface for months will we?"

"Well of course not." The warden's face was growing redder. "That must be a bit of a problem for you o' course 'cos you ain't got any of your stuff with you, 'ave you?" He cackled. Was it funny that I hadn't brought any of my possessions?

My ears were now aching and pounding. My muscles were tense and I only wished that Zeus would take me away from here soon.

"Have you heard of a superconducting super-collider?" I asked the warden, remembering this from my visit to the better parallel universe, and wanting to take my mind off things.

"Wha' the hell are you talking about?" said the warden.

"Do you know the charge of an electron?"

"Wha'?"

"Who discovered the first laws of gravitation?"

"Shut up will you? I haven't the foggiest what you're banging on about. Neither would anyone."

There was another menacing crash from above ground and the people in the shelter began screaming again (as if it would make the situation any better). The noise retained a dangerously high volume level from then on. I stood up and wandered through the corridors, seeking an empty area of some kind, such as a restroom.

The corridors went on and on, seemingly forever. But I was not to be fatigued. I kept going, trying to block out the sounds of the people around me, and the coldness of the place. It was a terrifying ordeal to say the least. In one hallway, somebody threw an alarm clock across the gangway to an opposite bed without caring about my head being in the way. I only just missed it. In another corridor, two teenagers were having a fight, and I had to go around a different corridor.

But I traipsed on. I needed somewhere quieter to think and compose a plan. For me that was the best method of plan construction. All of the beds I passed were occupied. There were many people sitting on the floor as I had done. Everyone was in bad condition. I concluded that my only escape was via Zeus.

"Zeus?" I called out. I was just a mouse in comparison to everyone else's shouting. "Zeus!"

I kept walking through and through the labyrinth. Just when I thought I would be doing this for the rest of my days, I came to a corridor right at the back of the shelter. This was the end. Holding on to the stone wall I made my way to the right of the corridor, needing to dodge around a few people who had set up camp here. When I finally got to the edge of the hallway, to the very corner of the shelter itself, I was faced with a door to the toilets: the ladies.

A quick peer through the doorway of the toilets revealed it to be jam-packed with people. So there was nothing else for it. I would find no peace unless I made my way back up above ground. So that's exactly what I set out to do, even if it meant a break-down in logic or in my life.

I wanted to find Zeus up there. My mind was too cramped to think safely of the hazards of post-nuclear attack though.

I traipsed all the way back to the other side of the shelter. It was slightly easier this time because I was on the edge, but it still took a nerve-shatteringly long time. I found that my eyes were watering and that they had become dirty and injured in several places. When I finally reached the staircase I felt that nothing was ever going to go right. There was no way I could possibly get back up the stairs because floods of people were trying to get down into the shelter. They started pushing past me, so I hurried back down the corridor and waited in another junction for the crowds to subside.

"Zeus?" I called again feebly, as I sunk down to the ground, exhausted.

I waited half an hour in the hellish place before attempting to go back to the stairs. People were taking shelter on the staircase now. It was a horrific sight to see these people cradling their families and trying to save themselves. I tread up the stairs carefully. I reached the top, ramfleezed, and the sight of what I saw on the ground was such a shock to the system that I almost tumbled right back down.

I could see as far across the town as my eyes permitted, all across the horizon. This was because there were no buildings to block my vision. They had all been completely flattened, even the high-rise tower blocks. All that was left was a mangled mess of rubble, broken appliances, shattered glass and smashed up furniture. Sporadically across the barren landscape was a fire, just blazing in the background. I was devastated; as was the city. I took a few cautious steps out into the street. If it was as destroyed as this, surely no more bombs would drop?

"Zeus?" I called. "Zeus?"

"Would you get back into the shelter?" cried a warden, approaching me authoritatively, "Are you suicidal or something?"

"No," I said firmly.

"Get back in before I throw you in," the man shouted. I ignored him and walked further into the street. The warden did not pursue me.

"Zeus!" I yelled, "Zeus?" The words echoed around the scene ominously. It was my only hope of escape. Zeus wouldn't leave me here would he?

Again I looked to the sky as I called Zeus's name. I thought I saw a hat fly past in the wind but then my vision was becoming dreary and fuzzy; it could have been anything.

"Oberon?" came a voice from behind me. When I turned, I saw something nearly as shocking as when I'd first seen this devastated place.

It was me, but it wasn't me. It was another Oberon Furrow, and he was looking bedraggled and unhealthy. His hair was unkempt, his eyes were red and sore and his limbs were pale and filthy. "What..."

"Look," said the first Oberon, "come over here and I'll explain." I took my parallel self behind a burnt but still standing door frame.

"What is it? Do I have a twin that I didn't know about?"

"No. I'm from another universe." We were both out of breath, and I had no idea how this other Oberon was going to react to the explanation.

"What do you mean, another universe? What does that mean?"

"It means there are multiple realities. This is one of them, and I've landed up here from my universe. Do you get it?"

"Not really."

"I'm an alternative version of you from a different universe."

"An alternative version of me?" my alternative version said.

"Yes." We were both lost for words for a while. "There isn't a nuclear war in my universe. What's this war about anyway?"

"It's... it's... well... the war? Well it's complicated. The UK refused to help with the latest battle, so after some heated debates between the officials and so on - I don't really understand it; I don't think anyone does - but I know the new president of the US decided that he no longer wanted the UK on the map, or something stupid like that. They started calling places the root of all evil and things like that, and so eventually everybody took sides and we're having a nuclear war over it."

I was aghast. How could you have a nuclear war over something so utterly petty? It sounded like classroom fights. My mouth hung open in shock (for the millionth time this month). I was lost for words once more. And there was another frightening thought... the most frightening of all... would this be the way that my universe would go?

"A nuclear war over that?" I said. My other self nodded.

There was another raid siren. And it was shortly followed by the tell-tale sound of a dropping bomb. We dashed towards the shelter

in a panic, but the my other self tripped over a mangled bar of steel. I was just about to go down the stairs, when I glanced back to see my other self holding his ankle in agony, unable to move. I rushed to help.

"Are you all right?" I asked quickly.

"No..."

"Get in the – shelter before you get blown to pieces," a warden yelled at them from the entrance to the shelter.

I held out my hand for Oberon to take hold of. There was a second pause, and he did. I helped him up, but he was badly hurt and had to hold onto his ankle and hop. The warden had just ran into the shelter himself. The sound of the dropping bomb was getting louder and louder, almost as if it was directly above us.

It was.

I was sure I couldn't get my other self safely into the shelter in time. I had the choice: leave him here and save myself, or have us both die. I appealed to the gods:

"Zeus!" I yelled at the very top of my voice into the sky. As I looked into the sky I noticed that it had a yellow and orange haze to it.

"Who?" the other Oberon asked.

And then, before there was any more time to think or breathe or call for help, the bomb dropped, and it landed with the most horrendous potency, just outside the raid shelter entrance.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I followed the two of them through the forest where I had been resting. We emerged on the grassy bank of a large round lake – well, it was probably too small to be a lake, yet too large to be a pond. It may have been deceiving, owing to the fact that a huge structure was set right in the middle of it. Spores around its rim were filling the lake, making it look as though it was standing there with legs of water; I may have thought it to be levitating had I not spotted the thin cluster of pipes in the centre that were holding it just short of an arm-span from the water's surface. It would be difficult to explain the exact shape of the structure. I suppose the closest shape would be that of an egg, but its lower segments were certainly quite square, and it had pipes that emanated from it at the top.

We stopped when we reached a waist-high hollow ochre tube sticking out from the ground. My two escorts stood on either side of it, and each dropped in a small blue gem. There was a clink as they hit the bottom, then a low fizz, and then blue smoke was being puffed out of the tube. Clanking, hydraulic noises were now coming from somewhere; I took a step further to the water's edge to see a gold-coloured walkway protruding from the ground, gradually covering the moat that extended around the structure. But it stopped. It stopped about halfway across with a loud clang.

The female Fregoan gestured for me to follow her across the new bridge. Her companion stayed behind on the grass. When we reached the end, she knelt down and rotated some of the bars that were making up the lattice walkway. I am sure she was entering a code.

"Top security is it?" I said. She did not reply. The walkway had started moving. It was floating across the water – hovering above it, rather than sliding along it – and heading for the structure in the middle. It ascended slowly and the ends of two protruding bars on the walkway slotted into two holes in the building, locking it into place. She stepped right up to the wall of the place and then, with clenched fists, thumped a combination of four segments on the wall. There was a deep but distant rumbling sound, and a small door-width section of the wall slid open.

The room inside had an orange glow. It would otherwise have been pitch dark. The glow seemed to be at a peak in the centre, where there was a simple chair, with a thin high back, clad in a red leathery

material. Metal bars, with a yellowish tint, criss-crossed each other around the walls, reaching up to the ceiling until they were out of reach of the glow. The floor was a dirty yellow mesh, looking down upon the swells of murky water beneath.

"I'm Galatea, by the way," my guide announced, "Would you like to sit down?"

"But I don't know what this is..." I protested.

"It is safe."

I was uneasy, but I trusted these people. I approached the chair. It did not look comfortable, but then I suppose it was not designed for comfort. I sat down. Galatea stood just in front of me, and then reached over me to pull a small handle, as though flushing a toilet. I did not dwell on this overpowering sanitary analogy, for as soon as the chain was pulled, the chair, and the little stretch of yellow mesh on which Galatea was standing, began rising up into the air. It was ascending at quite a pace through the darkness above, my only clues to remaining conscious being the deep mechanical rumbling it made and the cold metal touch of the armrests on the chair.

I looked up. Surely the structure wasn't this high?

"Brace yourself," came Galatea's voice, and I found her hand pushing my thorax over, so that my head was in my knees. I discovered why, as I felt my back pound against the ceiling, with enough force to open a trapdoor that led to the outside world.

We emerged from the very top of the structure, looking out over the infinite forest landscape. I sat up straight to observe it. But I was expecting a stationary viewing platform. I had not expected the chair to continue its ascent into the sky!

"Are there rockets under this thing?"

"No," she said, as it rocketed further and further away from the structure. I held onto the seat tightly, and was almost catapulted into the sky myself when it stopped abruptly, at a point high enough for the building to look like a grey plate in the middle of a pond, and the forest to be like a fluffy lawn. Suddenly the chair, and the platform, moved backwards a short way, so that we were no longer directly above the building. I noticed that it was not automated, but that Galatea was surreptitiously controlling the thing with a well hidden lever.

"So why are we up here?" I asked, still clinging tightly to my

chair.

"This device is kind of a cross between your Hyperspace Stations and the Corfizz Hyperspatial Summoning."

"What device?" I said, fearing it might be my chair she was talking about.

"This one," she answered, gesturing to the building with one hand, and pulling an inconspicuous lever with the other.

There was a screech, a rubbing sound, and then a series of metallic clangs. I looked down to watch. It was spinning. As it spun, it seemed to get larger. But no, this was not the sign of something getting larger, it was the sign of something getting closer. The whole buildings was propelling itself – somehow – out of the lake, and rising to meet us! The noises got louder and louder as it approached. The water that was being hosed out of the rim of it had now formed a great circular waterfall right around the building, so that it wasn't just getting noisier with the mechanical whirls, but also as the water hit the lake below from a greater distance! It was soon generating quite a spray, and the structure was just below us. With a suitably conclusive mechanical whirl, it stopped, floating in the air, its base exactly level with our own floating platform. I was transfixed on the waterfall.

"It's a secret experiment," Galatea explained.

"Secret?" I repeated, "How can something like *this* be *secret*?"

"We have our ways," she said. Now then. All you have to do is sit back in your chair—" (I had not noticed that I had got up to take a closer look), "and I will place this headset on you." The headset looked quite familiar – similar to the Brain Box interfaces. I noticed the electrodes. "The device will attempt to summon a person to Frego – drop them through a wormhole, if you like. The headset picks up your brain patterns, then searches for the person in your memory, and then searches for them in the universe."

"But how does it do that?"

"I'll give you the drawings, *when* the experiment is out of the experimental stages."

"How can you be sure it is safe to use if it's still experimental?"

"We are sure it cannot harm anything." Without further ado, she placed the headset upon me and explained, "Now, there is somebody you wish to summon. All you must do is picture that person as vividly as you possibly can, and from as many angles as you

possibly can, as though they are floating right underneath the waterfall in front of you. Got that?"

"OK," I said. I heard a click, and the headset activated. My vision now had a bluish tinge. I had a devious idea, and set to work immediately, picturing in front of me as hard as I could the form of that elusive figure that found me in the wormhole network back in chapter one. I did as my guide had said, picturing him floating in the waterfall, from as many angles as I could.

She lifted the headset off.

"Did you do it?" she said.

"Yes," I replied, my vision normal again, "I thought I did quite a good job of imagining him."

"Nothing's happening," she said. She was right. Everything seemed the same. "Let me check the connections."

She cranked forward a lever, and the platform floated over towards the waterfall.

"You don't mind getting a bit wet do you?" she said.

"We're going *underneath* it?"

"Yes."

I was quickly drenched by the waterfall, but it did not matter – the Frego sun would surely dry it before I returned to my work. I looked up to see the underside of the building. It was a tangled, sprawling mass of wires and metal bars of all colours. Galatea immediately began fiddling with the connections, pressing little buttons that lit up a small white light, and muttering "Yes" to herself as she went through it. She did not check *every* wire, of course, and eventually sighed with the declaration that everything was in working order. She pulled the lever backward, and the platform retreated from underneath the structure, back through the waterfall, and away to the point at which we had stopped before.

"Try it with someone else," she said, "Can you do that?"

"Yes," I answered, taking out my Conterrogator and examining the 3D digital representation of my next target – the boy.

"Ready?"

She put the headset back on me, and I pictured this boy in front of me – jet black hair, large eyes, wearing nothing but a ragged-looking old cloth around his waist. Suddenly, the waterfall began to spin. It became harder and harder to keep the image still, but then my

vision returned to normal. The waterfall was still rotating.

"Should I still be imagining him?" I asked.

"It's OK. I think it's working."

The building seemed to be tipping over. It was rotating itself – clockwise; coupled with the waterfall's rotation it was an awesome sight to behold. But I was not prepared for the realisation when it hit me – when the building was on its side, laid out flat in the sky, the water was not flowing down onto the trees below. It was still flowing *away* from the building – and now, that meant it was flowing *to the left*, as though gravity had ceased to affect it! The structure carried on rotating, and the waterfall was soon being directed at the sky. And it didn't seem to go anywhere, either; it went on infinitely into the clouds, or at least, as far as I could still see it. The building stopped rotating when it was upside-down, and the waterfall was no longer a *waterfall* – more of a *waterrise*!

As if that were not fantastical enough, I was awestruck even more when it appeared that gravity switched itself back on. The wall of water collapsed, falling into the underside of the structure, with the excess water spilling over the outside and dropping into the lake. I almost didn't notice that Galatea was driving the platform closer to the building again. We were soon passing over the rim of the structure. I saw at once that the web of wires and bars was no longer there – it was just a very large grey basin, as though the building was now a giant egg cup. The basin was filled with water, of course, and the platform glided over it serenely.

Well, I had been shocked enough already, but imagine how it was when I saw something burst out of the water. Imagine my shock when I saw it was the boy – my next subject – spluttering as he came from under the surface, splashing water around him as he did. Galatea went quickly to help him out, and I fumbled for my Translator.

The revelation began.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I found myself lying down on my sofa in the lounge. Zeus was looking over me with a concerned expression. I was aware that my heart was still beating fast, the sweat still on my forehead, my legs still aching; my breathing still heavy. My first thought was of my alternative self and what had happened to him.

"Is he all right?" I found myself gasping, sitting up.

Zeus pushed me back into a lying position. "He's fine. I transported him to the inside of the shelter."

"Oh thank you. I wouldn't want a death on my conscience."

"No. But you realise, of course, that an infinite number of parallel universes exist and have existed where you are dead don't you?"

"Er..." I didn't really wish to dwell on the concept, "well, I suppose, yes I realise it, but it's not the sort of thing I'd like to think about."

"Do you know how many universes exist where I am dead?" Zeus asked, taking a seat in a leather chair that I didn't have.

"I don't know." I sat up slowly.

"I'll tell you: none. The parallel universes extend in a fifth dimension, beyond time, and of course, the tenth dimension is well beyond the fifth, making me well beyond quantum probability. I am effectively invincible. I'm certainly invincible in comparison to the idiots... I mean inhabitants of this particular planet; what could they do? Fire a useless gun or a missile? I can never be trapped in this dimension, so it's child's play to escape into a higher one. And whilst you are one of my acquaintances, you can consider yourself in the same situation."

Sixty seconds silence.

"Why was it," I said on a different subject, "that you took so long to remove me from the universe?"

"I only wanted to remove you from the second universe as soon as your life was in danger. Your life wasn't in danger in the first universe though because you were sitting safely in a café. In the second universe, you barely lasted an hour."

"I see. May I point out that I thought the first universe was quite similar to Zirth?"

"Yes you may point it out if you wish."

"The first universe was quite similar to Zirth."

"Yes it was. The idea was to show you two entirely different universes each at the opposite of extremes. The first universe was a much better version of this one, almost the best it could possibly become; the second was the very worst this planet could become. Now the reason I wished to show you them was to ask this controversial question: which of those two universes is closest to this universe?"

I had to think carefully on this question, although I thought I knew the answer immediately. The answer kept dancing up and down at the back of my mind, and I seemed to be trying to make excuses on why it might not be true. But it was. It was quite a depressing thought. In this universe, the original one, there was war, congestion, litter in abundance, corruption and the possibility of nuclear warfare... just like the second universe.

"The second universe," I said softly.

"Yes," said Zeus, "I knew you'd say that. And I can see how that makes you feel. You find it quite a depressing thought."

It may have been depressing because of the other thought it provoked, which was bordering on the scary. What if a nuclear war were to break out on this universe? Myself in the second universe had told me how it had begun: it all started when the UK refused to help the US in a particular battle. Was that likely to happen in this universe?

For answer, Zeus picked up the television remote control and turned on the television. What I heard shocked me so much that I gasped in a way I might if the television were a tiger, approaching me with a hungry grin.

"The Prime Minister has just announced," said the news reporter, "that the UK will not be participating in the latest battle, for reasons that he claims are 'under review'. The streets of London see rejoice from anti-war protesters, and the British army is retreating as we speak..."

"Oh my God," I said.

"Yes?" said Zeus. He turned the TV off.

"No not you. I mean... I'm completely aghast." Were nightmares coming true? I was unsure I could cope with the burden of being the only one to know a nuclear war was approaching. And to stop it I would have to persuade them to go to battle, which sounds

counter-intuitive and confusing...

"I knew you would be frightened. But don't panic. It may not happen for ages yet."

"Ages?"

"Well, by ages I mean in the region of five years... two at the earliest... or slightly sooner," and seeing my panicked expression Zeus hastily added: "but not by much."

"But..."

"Don't panic! I can see the future, as I said. And it's a little under two years so we have plenty of time."

"Plenty of time..." I whispered, trying to calm myself down.

"Seriously. If it happened – and I won't say whether it will or not – but if it does, it does. There is *always* a universe in which it happens. Always. I just wanted you to be aware, that's all."

"Right," I said, getting myself back together, "Yes you're right. You're absolutely right. What can I do about it anyway? It's beyond my control. It isn't beyond yours of course, but mine... yes, you're right. Yes. Right. Have you... er... have you started time yet?"

"No," replied Zeus, "It's still stopped. Let's have a wander around. When you're ready."

I was ready in forty-five minutes, but it felt like a timeless experience, much like Zeus would normally have in his home environment. By having a wander, Zeus did not mean on foot. Zeus transported us both to the street outside, looking at a woman with blonde hair and a yellow informal jacket and leggings. Zeus turned to face me.

"How old would you say she was?" he asked. I looked the woman over once more, noticing heavy make-up.

"Late thirties?" I suggested.

"Well," said Zeus, "she's actually fifty-four and does her utmost to look younger. Her face is covered over in abundance with anti-ageing creams. She washes her hair eight times a day. Her name is Mary, and she is the secretary in a primary school. She has been married thrice, has two dogs and three puppies, and enjoys horse-riding. Her third husband is called Jim and he's an engineer."

"Right," I said unenthusiastically. What was the point in this? Was Zeus just showing off?

"I heard that," said Zeus.

We suddenly appeared outside the Coliseum in Rome. It was so abrupt that I took a few seconds to register the information: it was sunny, crowded and again, even here, everyone was stopped dead in their tracks.

"This Italian," said Zeus, indicating a tanned man with a briefcase under his arm, "is a banker called Alberto. He's forty-five, has three children and has a fervent dislike for pears."

I was about to acknowledge this information when I found myself looking at a boy, who was leaning against an acacia tree, fiddling with a leaf.

"Burkina Faso," Zeus announced, "This boy here enjoys examining nature and its fruits; he dreams of finding out more, but alas, he can neither read nor write. His poor family are around here somewhere."

My sympathy had barely time to reach the light when I found I was staring at a silent and frozen waterfall; I recognised it immediately: Niagara Falls. We were standing by some frozen-in-time tourists in anoraks, holding umbrellas. The family right next to us did not look very enthralled by the waterfall.

"This is a British family," Zeus explained, "who aren't too interested because they are quite used to being wet - they live in Wales. This man," and he indicated a rather thin and tall man whose facial features were obscured by a hood, "is a member of parliament. He is a very nervous person and is in charge of foreign affairs which he knows almost nothing about. He hates long-winded questions unless he is the one asking them. His daughter is in a large amount of debt but won't admit it."

"I see," and no sooner had I said it than we were whisked off to Miami Beach. I had never seen it before; the sun was blinding in my eyes. A wave was in mid-flow, and surfers were taking advantage of it. I could go on exploring it, but I did not have much time with Zeus, despite the fact that time was frozen!

"Here is a hairdresser called Katy," said Zeus, gesturing to a woman in a pink bikini, "and here is a pilot called Steve," and he indicated a man wearing sunglasses who seemed to be engaged in conversation with Katy. "They are engaged to be married, but Steve will tragically die in a motoring accident in Tallahassee."

"Oh dear," I said, "Can we do anything?"

Abruptly, Zeus took us back to Mary in Church Street. It was quite a contrast from Miami!

"Mary is about to post a letter here." Zeus pointed to the post box. This was the only post box for miles, I knew. "Quite right. Let me start time again."

Zeus disappeared. I felt temporarily unsafe, but I knew there was little to worry about. My vision went blank for a second, and then I saw Mary move. She approached the letter box, took out a bunch of letters from her yellow jacket pocket, and pushed them through the letter box. Then she stopped, her hand poised in mid-air. I looked up. A bird was frozen in mid-flight. Then it started flying... but backwards! I looked down again and saw Mary magically receiving the letters from the post box and then retreating backwards to where she began. Then time stopped again.

Zeus reappeared. "That's her future. Now see if you can prevent it."

He vanished before I could say anything. Mary was approaching the post box once more, so to try and stop her, I lunged forward in the hope of blocking the post box. However, I tripped on the curb and fell flat on my face. Mary did not seem to have noticed, and posted her letters as she had done before.

Zeus returned.

"So are you trying to say that whatever I do, it's impossible to change time? That everything is pre-determined, and set in stone before you've even done it?"

"No – you're just clumsy. Try again."

It was making me dizzy the way he kept vanishing and reappearing all the time. In my second attempt, I stood next to the post box, and as Mary was about to post the letters, I spoke out:

"Stop!" I said urgently. She did. "Well, that proves it doesn't it?" I said to Zeus, who I remembered wasn't actually there. Mary walked away, shooting a funny glance at me as if thinking I were mad – well, could you blame her when I had just spoken to thin air?

"Don't worry," said Zeus, reappearing, "You'll never see her again." On top of dizziness I was feeling uneasy about all of Zeus's knowledge of the future. "Sorry. Now you realise the reason this works is because at the deciding time between Mary posting the letters and not posting them, universes were created to enact all of the many

millions of possibilities; you have merely directed yourself into one you might otherwise not have ended up in."

Walking home, I found myself asking Zeus a profound question.

"How do you do it?"

"How do I tell the future?"

"How do you do all of these weird and wonderful things? All you've told me so far is that you're ten-dimensional and have the abilities of a god. You have the power to take 'short-cuts' through higher dimensions. But I'm a layperson as you must well know, and I don't understand..."

"All we become clear," said Zeus, "Don't trouble your mind so much now. You have already been taking some far-flung inter-dimensional trips to other universes. You must relax for a while."

He 'teleported' us the rest of the way, and arranged it so that we appeared sitting down at the table. A late lunch was already prepared for me: a selection of salad items, including coleslaw, Waldorf salad, celery and tomatoes; there were slices of buttered bread; there were pork pies; slices of ham and chicken; and neatly folded serviettes.

"All for you, if you want it," said Zeus.

"Thank you... aren't you eating?"

"I don't need to. I could if I wanted but it wouldn't have any benefit. It doesn't matter if you don't eat it all; it won't go to waste."

"That's true. Thank you very much. It looks delicious."

I ate as much food as I could manage, which wasn't too much. I did find it delicious actually – it was ever so succulent and fresh, as food should be; the food that the shops sold was inebriated in chemicals and artificial flavourings, so much so that I found I couldn't be absolutely sure of the validity of its product description. As I thought this I popped a last (cherry) tomato into my mouth, wiped my mouth with a serviette, and then turned to Zeus.

Zeus was wearing a Greek toga and was reading a magazine called *Pythagorean Weekly*.

I laughed.

"Funny?" said Zeus, making the magazine disappear. He did not wait for a reply. "Have you finished your lunch?"

"I have, and it was most exquisite," I said.

"Good," and with a swish of his hand Zeus dismissed the

remaining food from the table. He then changed his clothes back to a suit. "And I see it's going down nicely too – not an elegant digestive system you humans have, I attest, but still, efficient." He was staring at my stomach. Feeling uneasy I tightened my jacket and folded my arms. "Are you still interested in learning more about the way the tenth dimension works?" I was about to reply but Zeus got there first: "I see, well..."

"Could you please try to remain in the habit of letting me voice my own opinions before you answer?"

"Yes, of course, sorry. Anyway, I'll teach you about the tenth dimension tomorrow, if I may, when I've worked out a suitable demonstration for you. It'll be better in a fresh chapter, I think. For the moment, however, we have time to talk about other interesting phenomena. Quantum cryptography? The Lorentz contraction? The metaphysics of six-dimensional Calabai-Yau manifolds?"

"Huh – how much time do we have?" Zeus looked at something on his wrist.

"Oh, a few pages. Anyway, where would you like to have our discussion? By the Aiee Waterfall in Aquearia? In the Famous Gardens of Quarnascent?"

"Where's that?" I said, frowning in confusion and curiosity.

"The Aiee Waterfall is the highest on the planet Zirth, and the Famous Gardens are on the planet Curea. If you prefer we could find a restaurant in Dumpèd - that's also on Zirth. Or maybe you'd prefer a Topomilian hotel?"

"I'm sorry I think I'd just like to talk here please. If that's OK."

"Why?"

"Because..."

"I see. You feel that foreign planets are too much for you to cope with just at the moment and you would feel safer to be in familiar environments. Fair enough."

"No – I was just thinking about having only a few pages."

"Ah yes of course; would take rather an eloquent description."

"I promise that I'll see those places later," I said, "when I understand a little more."

"OK. For now we'll talk here."

"I know I'd regret it if I didn't ask these questions," I said, "So Zeus, if you know everything, then can you explain a few things like..."

for example, the Bermuda Triangle?"

"What about the Bermuda Triangle?"

"Why is it that all of the sailors who've travelled there have vanished without trace? Is there a wormhole there?"

"It's not very exciting actually. The Bermuda Triangle, and it's a pure coincidence, contains an abundance of methane gas by the seabed, and it's also prone to waterspouts. So, coupled with the harsh and unpredictable weather conditions, ships tend to be exploded into the sea and sucked into underwater caves before they're found."

"Oh," I said.

"Not everything has a world-changing, divine explanation, you know," said Zeus, "Some things – all things, in fact – are just a matter of cause and effect."

"Right. Now what about Jesus? The resurrection and all that?"

"Ah. Now that *is* an interesting story. Let me show you."

Suddenly I found myself transported to a cave...

The ceiling was exceptionally low, and the cave was barely large enough for me to fit in it. It was dark, but light was coming from somewhere on the floor. I inspected the stone floor to find a small hole through which I could peer. What I saw astonished me.

Through the hole, I could make out an extremely black cavern of some nature, and I must have been above its ceiling. There was a walkway through the centre of the cavern; it looked like a catwalk. There were black and grey ornate designs on it too, giving it a truly mystic feel. It led to the back of the cavern where there was a circular clear area. The sides of the catwalk were shrouded in dark shadow. It looked empty and mysterious to begin with, until two strange entities suddenly appeared, suspended in mid-air above the circular platform.

The strange entities were constantly changing shape: from fleshy balls to irregular and indescribable solids made of materials that I had never seen before. The entities were cycling through all of these different shaped multi-coloured 'things' constantly, and all the while, voices were emanating from them. The voices were in a strange language that I did not recognise - it didn't even sound Zirthiran. The sounds made by these creatures 'mouths' (I could not determine where they were, or which of the cycled 'things' it was) could probably not be reproduced by any human without major surgery.

Abruptly I found that the Corfizz Universal Translator Device

was in my hand. I used it advantageously, with Zeus's disembodied voice helpfully supplying the name of the language I was translating, and so I determined the following conversation:

"Now look what you have done! We are now facing the authorities with something deeply serious because of all this!"

"We've been through this before. You know very well how hard things were for me then."

"You shouldn't have interfered. You should have kept your child in your own dimension without disguising yourself and forcing innocent 3D people to believe it's their child."

"She believed it though! She believed that I was some kind of divine angel. I even got her to call him by the right name."

"But then look what happened. Your child starts acting differently to them and they try to kill him."

"And I saved him."

"I know you did. But then you sent him back. Thousands of 'years' on that little planet those people have been trying to fathom out how someone comes back to life after three days, and how their body disappears from a blocked tomb. And it was your fault! And they got a whole religion going on it!"

"I didn't know that's what it was! I didn't make the connection."

"All because you didn't make a connection, we're in trouble for interfering with lesser beings."

"We should stop arguing about it and sort out a plan of action. What are we going to do about Jesus for example?"

"We're guilty! There's no plan!"

"There's only one defence for us: the rule was still in debate at the time this was happening."

"Oh yes?"

But then, I found myself back at home with Zeus (just when it was getting interesting; typical!)

"You're right," I said, in a bit of a trance from what I had heard, "That really was interesting. So why didn't the Corfizz Perception Engine allow me to see them properly?"

"That's because they're four-dimensional beings of course. They have four dimensions to them, and no concept of 'time' whatsoever. All they have is a life in probability. Their law says they are not allowed to interfere with lesser-dimensional beings. That 4D

woman, a long 'time' back in this 3D universe, did interfere, and she's in a spot of trouble. The constantly changing shapes that you saw are the components of the 4D life-form. If you folded those shapes up into the fourth dimension, you'd get their real appearance, but you have disadvantaged eyes, so you can only see part of the being at once."

"I get it," I said, almost truthfully. "This is... fascinating," and I shook my head from side to side to punctuate the statement.

"Of course it is," said Zeus.

"Anyway..." I snapped out of my trance and instantly became lost for conversation again, "Can you levitate things? Just out of interest."

"Levitate things?" Zeus repeated, "Think about it. Imagine our two-dimensional example, with Hermes. You would be able to move things around his universe without him actually seeing your hand, wouldn't he?"

"Oh yes," I said when I had visualised it, "Very true. So you can levitate things."

"I can do everything, Oberon."

I turned from Zeus to see that one of my armchairs was no floating in the air! Zeus was smiling, as he often did when he was showing off his powers.

"They're not powers! I'm just... advantaged."

"All right. All right." I knelt down next to the floating chair and waved my hand to and fro beneath it. It was definitely floating!

"Look," said Zeus, "this is funny," and wings suddenly appeared on the chair! They were large white flapping wings - Zeus was obviously proud of them; I chuckled at them. The wings faded away, and Zeus landed the chair safely back on the floor.

"Very amusing," I said, sitting back down. I switched the television on, and Zeus changed the channel. The European Lotterio was on (what was originally the 'national lottery' was now a Europe-wide game). "So what are the numbers this week?"

Zeus waved a hand before speaking, as if predicting the results was child's play. "Six, eight, thirteen, twenty-two, forty-four and forty-eight. And yes, it is child's play."

"What about the bonus ball?"

Zeus sighed. "Thirty-eight."

"And the Lotterio numbers tonight, are..." said the presenter,

naming them as they appeared, "Twenty-two... thirteen... eight... six... forty-four... and forty-eight! And the bonus ball tonight is... number thirty-eight, the most popular number of the series."

"Well done," I said, wondering why I was not already rich, "So how many people won?"

"Only three. A bank manager in Stockholm who had plenty of money anyway and only bought a ticket for the sake of it; a single mother in Lübeck; and a Spanish dancer that lives in Yorkshire."

Zeus turned the television off, "We should talk about Zirth and Curea. It will give you a start on raising your understanding."

"Right. Where do we start?"

"With champagne." Zeus conjured up a lead crystal glass of champagne.

"Wow!" My face brightened considerably. "Thanks." I took a small swig right away.

"Oh yes, there's something else you'll like." Zeus conjured up a dessert. This was a dessert that I had never seen before. The surface was a mixture of cream and chocolate, but a very special mixture: the cream and the chocolate were weaved together in an ever so complex manner that it looked as though years of skill and training had gone into it. There was a layer of orange sponge beneath this; it all looked exceedingly tantalising. It was so tantalising in fact, that I found that my mouth was watering wildly, and I actually found myself moving my seat closer to the table. In fact I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"This," said Zeus, "is bon-dellee pudding. It's a Zirthiran dessert, and you're probably finding it tantalising aren't you?"

My eyes were still fixed on the dessert. I couldn't find the energy to reply – it was as though my brain had blocked conscious use of my mouth to save power for the devouring of this dessert.

"Yes, you are," said Zeus. "This is because the dessert is so carefully crafted that it excites the taste buds of any life form in the universe that *has* taste buds. You see, the sponge is multi-flavoured to the extent that every group of atoms in it has an entirely different flavouring, all of them delightful, from mellemon to lurich to strawberry-flavoured ice to sweet pineapples to cream chocolate – even if you don't like mellemon or lurich, or any of the others."

"What's a mellemon or a... lurik?" I asked, not paying too much attention. I'd already moved the plate closer to me, and was

neglecting my champagne.

"A mellemon is a fruit a bit like a melon and a lemon put together. Lurich is a type of vegetable in the shape of a quill. Anyway, the core of the bon-dellee pudding is a special... bon-dellee toffee-like substance, so crafted that it is quite unlike regular toffee, such that it doesn't even affect those allergic to toffee."

"Really?" I said absently.

"It's a shame the world's going to end before you have time to take a bite, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, clutching a spoon and hovering it over the pudding greedily.

"He can't hear what I'm saying," said Zeus. "It's banned in a number of provinces because of how dangerous it is; people can't hear fire alarms. In most places it's illegal to have them on display in shop windows; the crowds can get rather disruptive. You know, if he wasn't vital to the plot we could go and have a chat ourselves. Not to worry. Well, go on, have some. Oh you already have."

My first mouthful was... indescribable... it was the most incredibly delectable and mouth-wateringly tasty dessert that I had ever had the fortune to take a bite out of. I couldn't stop at one bite though. I took another. The chocolate and cream together were brilliant enough, but the multi-flavoured sponge was the best part. I felt bursts of fruity flavour exploding in my mouth simultaneously: vanilla, banana and even the scent of flowers... it was... incredible. I was powerless to resist its magnificence. It was pleasure beyond pleasure – a whole greater than the sum of its parts. I didn't think of anything else until I had finished the last slice of the most delicious dessert dish in the universe.

"That was..." I began.

"You don't need to tell me," said Zeus, "I know. As I say, there isn't a life form in the universe that doesn't like it. The bon-dellee pudding market on Zirth is gargantuan, let alone the market for it on all of the other planets. It employs ninety-seven percent of the confectionery industry on Curea."

"Wow," I said. My tongue was vibrating. I reached for a glass of champagne but Zeus restrained me.

"No," he said, "after eating bon-dellee pudding you need at least four Earth minutes recovery period. If you do anything

immediately afterwards then you could cause tongue muscle damage, or corruption of your taste buds. You just need to sit in silence for the time."

We did. My mouth calmed down and my tongue gradually stopped shaking with excitement. I was actually reluctant to get rid of the after-taste with the champagne! When the four minutes was up I took a swig.

"As I was saying about Zirth and Curea," said Zeus, "They're both type seven civilisations, as I've explained before. This means that they've harboured their energy from multiple universes..."

"Just a moment," I half-whispered. I felt utterly drained of all energy. That pudding was just so delicious.

"Still recovering?" said Zeus, "I suppose newcomers to the dessert must find it rather more irresistible. You should try the ten-dimensional version. Obviously you can't because you haven't got the biology." Zeus stopped and stared into nothing. "You've got me going now. I'm thinking of ten-dimensional bon-dellee pudding." He clicked his fingers. "Snap out of it. Where was I?"

"Zirth... and..." I stuttered.

"Yes, right. Shall we skip this evening?"

"Skip it?"

"Yes. Just go forward in time to tonight."

"Why?"

"I have an urge to eat ten-dimensional bon-dellee pudding."

"So do I."

"Besides, I think you need a sleep. It's been a long and tiring day."

"So this is why we only had a few pages left."

Zeus chuckled. "Yes, I foresaw it all. OK then. Brace yourself." But Zeus didn't really give ample time for bracing, because I was immediately snatched into utter blackness. I was not submerged in darkness for very long, and then I found myself straight back at the table. "It's nine o'clock," Zeus announced.

"What?" I said, feeling dizzy.

"You must have a good night's sleep. A very good night's sleep. Make sure that you do."

"I will, I will," I assured him, and trotted idly to the bottom of the staircase. "I'll see you later," I called to Zeus as I took my first

steady steps up the stairs.

"Valedictions," said Zeus, and promptly vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The planet Earth completed another revolution of its axis, and the UK was now in light. A hundred and fifty million kilometres away, an enormous stellar nuclear furnace disbanded armies of photons. Several trillion of these particles, radiated in streams, took a short eight minute journey across vast stretches of space until they found themselves travelling through an atmosphere, on a course for a building. Eventually, they burst through Oberon's window, and illuminated his room.

I woke up. The glow of the sun was splendid, but was spoilt by noise - car engines, car horns, people shouting, teenagers playing loud music, police sirens, shouting, crashing, more shouting, teenagers' car stereos being destroyed by police hammers, nothing new. Just as I was about to get out of bed, he saw the strangest occurrence... Zeus was at work here. A silver tray holding a plate of toast, a teapot and a mug came floating through the door and placed itself on my lap in bed.

"Now that's room service," came the unmistakable voice of Zeus, before he appeared from nowhere at the foot of the bed.

"Thank you," I said, and poured myself some tea. "I've just woken up. So what have you been doing?"

"I was just playing dice," replied Zeus without enthusiasm.

"Playing dice? Surely with your abilities you'd do something a little more exciting?"

"Well, you see, I sometimes throw the dice into universes you cannot see."

"Oh," I said, "and was it a thrilling game?"

"Utterly boring. I'd much rather recount the life story of a Welsh member of Parliament who's holidaying in Canada." We laughed. "Enjoy your breakfast."

"I will." Zeus vanished.

Zeus reappeared when I was up and dressed. We sat down in the lounge, on the green sofa. It was Sunday and I was glad of it.

The 'phone rang.

"Hello?" I said to it. It was Victor. Again, shame fell upon me for not having contacted him; in fact, I had barely thought about Victor in the past few days. "Hello Victor, it's good to hear from you. How have you been? How's Cindy?"

"Fine, thank you Oberon. I just rang because we hadn't spoken

to each other for some time. When can we meet up?"

"I'm afraid I can't," I said, today that is... because I have a lot of work to do, you see. I'm up to my ears in it. It's far harder at this new firm - Yenom Accounting - it really is."

"Oh I see," said Victor, dismayed, "I'll call you another day then. I just thought we should keep in touch, you know. Sorry about the work."

"No it's fine. You must have other things to do?"

"Oh yes. Yes, yes. I know that I need to... I need to do the garden. The garden always needs doing. I always put it off you see - doesn't everyone? Ha! - but yes, the plants, and the patio of course - they all need to be kept up together. That's what I'll do."

"Great. Fine. Yes. You do that, and try and enjoy it."

"I won't."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye Oberon. I'll see you later this week." They hung up.

"Now," said Zeus, "I was going to show you a demonstration of higher dimensions, was I not?"

"You were, yes."

"OK. Well, I am in fact going to demonstrate by means of *lower* dimensions."

Zeus read my frown like a book: "You see, to understand higher dimensions," he said, "it is best to consider an analogy with the lower ones. Therefore we are going to examine a two-dimensional world that I'm going to create with paper." A piece of paper appeared in Zeus's hand. "This is our two-dimensional universe, OK?"

"Fine."

A full-colour 2D person drew itself onto the piece of paper. Not a stick person - this was a very detailed drawing indeed - all of the organs inside the 2D person's body were drawn in, and they were all in full working order: the heart, for example, was beating. There was one eye that pointed to the right of the page, and the person moved about left and right of his own volition.

"Wow," I said, "it's a living, breathing 2D person."

"It is indeed. He's going to be our test subject for the demonstration. He is unaware of our presence, because as you can see, he only looks and moves to the left or right. He never looks up or down because to him, there *is* no up or down. He believes that the

universe consists of the directions left, right, forward and back, and that's all. He cannot envisage the concept of 'up' or 'down'."

"Right." It made sense.

"He needs a name," said Zeus, "What shall we call him? You know, I got my name from one of your Greek mythological gods; how about Hermes?"

"That's the Greek messenger isn't it?"

"Yes. OK, Hermes it is. Now Hermes needs a 2D place to live. So let's draw on a house." A house drew itself on the page. It looked like a diagrammatic house – I could see separate rooms inside it. There were 2D shapes, representing furniture and other items. Hermes travelled to the wall of his 'house', opened a 'door' and stepped inside. "What do you notice?" said Zeus.

"What do I notice?" I repeated, unsure what Zeus was getting at, "He's in the house." I watched Hermes walk into an adjacent room.

"Can you see Hermes?" asked Zeus.

"Of course. He's just gone into his dining room."

"He can't see you can he?"

"No. I'm up here. He's on the drawing."

"So, you can see him but he can't see you. In other words, you can see into his house and look at his entire universe."

"Can I?"

"Well look. You can see the room he's in can't you?" said Zeus.

"Yes."

"And you can see the other rooms at the same time can't you?"

"Yes."

"Therefore, you can see all of his house simultaneously. To him, that sounds impossible."

"Oh yes," I said, "I suppose that's true. I never thought of it that way before."

"Now then: it's the same with this dimension. You are in your three-dimensional house. Suppose a four-dimensional person is looking at it. He could see all the rooms *at the same time*."

"That would be... very strange."

"No. It's the same as the way that Hermes cannot possibly visualise a three-dimensional person such as yourself looking at him. Nothing in his experience tells him that this third dimension exists."

"Since your ten-dimensional," I said, "that means you can see

all of the universe simultaneously, does it?"

"Yes. Only when I am in the ten-dimensional universe I come from. And it works with exactly the same principle as I have just demonstrated. Now let me show you something else."

Zeus moved his hand over Hermes, and took a grip on his 2D hand. He pulled, peeling the little man straight off the page! Hermes' jaws dropped as he observed his surroundings with wide eyes, looking as if vicious beasts were jumping out at him constantly. He struggled and writhed in Zeus's grip.

"You see," said Zeus, "I can pick him up into a higher dimension, and then place him back down somewhere else in the universe. Now, Oberon, if there was somebody else in the house watching me take Hermes and then put him back, what would they see?"

I thought: Hermes and the other person in his house cannot see 'up', so they would not see the hand coming. The person left at home would not see Hermes being lifted 'up' at all... in other words, he'd just see him vanish! I told Zeus of my thinking.

"Precisely," Zeus acknowledged.

"And therefore when you put him back," I continued, on a roll, "if another person were there, they'd see him reappear from nowhere. It all fits in! That must be how you and I vanish and reappear in different places." It was all making sense now. Of course, envisaging how the same scenario *really* worked – being lifted from the third into the fourth dimension – was somewhat trickier.

"Well of course it is," said Zeus, "Just as Hermes cannot imagine the concepts of 'up' or 'down'; so you cannot imagine the concept of a fourth spatial dimension perpendicular to the other three."

Zeus flipped Hermes around – this left him with his heart on the opposite side of his chest. Then he placed him back in his house, as casually as though he were pasting paper cut-outs with glue. Hermes seemed to be quite distraught; he was rushing about the room in a very agitated way, and I thought I could even hear slight whimpers.

"So Oberon," said Zeus, "you know that you can see inside his body. So what conclusion can you come to when applying the same principles to this dimension?"

"You can see inside my body?" I said, looking rather disgusted, and folding my arms awkwardly.

"Precisely," he said, and seeing my worried look he added: "You're in good shape, don't worry. Now then, notice that you can also see that I have completely reversed Hermes, so that his heart is on the other side. Is it possible to do this with three dimensional things, without the help of a higher dimension?"

"I don't think so. Not without major surgery."

Zeus conjured up another item: it was an ear, a human ear. I grimaced.

"Where on Earth did you get that?"

"That doesn't matter," said Zeus, blushing, "It's a left-hand ear. Can you turn it into a right-hand ear?"

I thought on it for a moment. "Of course not."

"Now, so that we know it's the same ear when it comes out of hyperspace, could you sign it for me please?"

"Sign it?" I repeated, utterly disgusted.

"Yes," he replied, producing a marker pen.

"Certainly not," I said. "It's all right – I don't need any proof."

"Suit yourself." Zeus threw the ear into the air, whereupon it vanished from sight. After a second or two, it reappeared, and fell neatly into Zeus's hand. He showed it to me, and it was immediately clear that it was a right-hand ear.

"Very good," I said, "So let me get this straight. When you threw it and it vanished, you were really taking it 'up' into a higher dimension." Zeus was nodding encouragingly, so I continued: "Then it flips over, and falls back down into this dimension, reversed. Is that right?"

"Absolutely. When you say it's taken 'up' into a higher dimension, it is actually taken in a direction that represents the fourth spatial dimension, and that, in its closest possible English transliteration, we can call 'ana'. The opposite way we can call 'kata'. Yes?" I nodded. "Right, I think that's enough of that for one chapter. Did you understand most of that?"

"I think I grasped it quite well actually."

"Very good. Thank you Hermes." Hermes waved his quaint 2D hand before Zeus made the paper universe vanish.

I still had questions, even though I have to admit I genuinely thought I'd understood the concept of higher dimensions to an encouraging extent. I was still wondering how Zeus was able to read

minds and tell the future, but this knowledge would inevitably come later.

"Er..." said Zeus, looking furtively at the bay window in the lounge, "I don't wish to worry you Oberon, but there are some young people trying to steal your car."

"What?" I exclaimed, not taking the information in fully. When it registered, I started to panic. I stood up and looked through the window. Zeus was right. There were some youths, probably not even twenty years old, who were trying to break the lock of the car with a crowbar. "How dare they? In broad daylight!"

What was perhaps even more shocking was that people were walking past the house, *while the thieves were in action*, and not taking one bit of notice! There were also people still queuing in their cars along the road. Ironically, a police car sped past the house on its way to another emergency.

"You can sort it out can't you?" I said to Zeus. Zeus stood up and observed the situation. It was mad. Who would be so desperate as to want to steal a car in broad daylight when the owners had every opportunity of seeing?

"I'll slow them down like this," said Zeus, and suddenly it began pouring with rain – in torrents. The criminals were surprised. One of them lifted his jacket over his head, and they carried on their jaunt. "I'll stop them like this." I did not see what Zeus had done, but I certainly saw a horrified expression on the thief with the crowbar. He was looking through the window as if there were a bomb there. He smashed open the window of the car with the crowbar. His hand went in, producing a grenade from the seat.

"You put a grenade in my car?" I said in disbelief.

"Don't worry – it can't hurt anyone," said Zeus, looking smug. The boy threw the grenade across the street, and it exploded in a menagerie of fruit, vegetables and flowers, in mid-air, causing quite a frenzy of panic amongst the car drivers and the passers-by. However, to my amazement, the criminals saw this as the perfect decoy in which to continue their scheme!

"The cheek of it!" I said. We were both still staring through the window, watching the utter stupidity unfold before us. The one with the crowbar opened the car door. Zeus conjured up a shock for him: a gorilla in the passenger seat. When he noticed the gorilla first, he did

not react, and continued trying to work out how he would get the car away.

Then it registered. He screamed and jumped out of the car. The gorilla waved at him and his mates, some of which were already running away. I chuckled.

The gorilla also got out of the car, and walked over to the ringleader, who was paralysed with fear. The gorilla had no difficulty in removing the crowbar from his hands. The power in the boy's legs returned shortly after, and he ran off the driveway. He tripped over a stone; Zeus accompanied his fall with a thunderbolt. The boy scrambled to his feet and hurried off without a moment to spare.

Zeus quickly made the gorilla disappear, and repaired the car's broken window. He brightened up the weather, and we looked out of the window once more, seeing it just as it was before any of the palaver had begun. Most strangely of all, nobody else seemed to have noticed at thing. Zeus and I sat back on the sofa.

"Thanks," I said.

"I should make a mental note: don't be quite so cruel in the future, but I think they deserved it. Now, Oberon, we have some things to discuss." I feared the worst. "You see, in my explanation with Hermes, I was demonstrating a fourth *spatial* dimension – one that is perpendicular to the three you are used to. But in truth, as you know, one of the dimensions to which I am superior manifests itself as your dimension of time – and so that is why I can traverse your 'time' (when I am in my everyday, ten dimensional form), just as easily as space. The point I'm getting round to is... when we went to Paris last, we didn't just traverse the *space* in between... we traversed time too."

"We went to Paris in a different time?"

"Yes – we went back in time. That was when Miranda saw us for the first time."

"Oh no. And I suppose that's why she came to Yenom that time, curious about things?"

"She's been trying to catch up with you for a long time, Oberon. She *is* a journalist. She wants the story."

"Oh really?"

"That's right. She knew about you before, though."

"Oh no. When I was working in London?"

"Yes."

"I was an adviser to the chancellor, and I suppose she's the one that's after for me that mistake I made. Can't they leave people alone? That was years ago. I just happened, by accident, to mix up the figures for a couple of very insignificant areas, which just happens to increase the budget for the exploration of the unexplained and the paranormal. It never got through, of course, but it was still an embarrassment, and was probably what cost me my job in the end."

"It needn't concern you too much, of course, but she might prove to be a... difficulty."

"Well, thank you for telling me, Zeus."

"That is quite all right, but now I have something even more serious to tell you." I was unprepared to fear the worst. I felt a flush of dread writhe through me. "Do you remember I said that it would be about two years before anything 'drastic' happened, war-wise?"

"Yes..." I said, shivering.

"Well I was lying. Now I need you to think carefully for a moment. Think about your world, this society. As we've just observed, the crime rate – and equally, the ignorance – is overwhelmingly high. And the road congestion is constantly out of control. To make that worse, there's the energy problem that nobody wants to sort out..."

"...and the pollution of the environment..."

"...abundance of litter..."

"...global poverty..."

"...corruption of language..."

"...corruption of knowledge..."

"...corruption of government..."

"...freedoms and liberties being abused..."

"...war all over the planet," Zeus concluded. We paused for reflection.

"Yes, come to think of it, it's not really a very nice society, this, is it?"

"No," Zeus agreed. "And why do you think this is? What do you think is the root cause of all of these issues... all this suffering... all of these overt problems? In short, Oberon: *why*?"

"I..." I didn't know what to say. I was feeling sad – I remember that – I almost felt ashamed to be living in that world: my world. "I'm not..."

"You know, I came to this world in the hope of finding

adventure, wisdom, and interesting experiences that I had never known before – never been *able* to know before. But instead, what do I find? This is a world with a problem – more of a problem than my higher-dimensional vantage point seemed to portray – and nobody is doing anything about it."

"Why couldn't you see from the tenth dimension?"

"I'd have thought that were obvious. An infinite Universe – with so many quintillions of possibilities, alternative futures, different cosmic structures, and different, more intelligent, races – well, it's hard to find such a comparatively *tiny* problem so important in the vast scales of space, time and beyond. Think about it Oberon. Why do you think these problems do exist?"

"War is a big issue."

"Why is there war?"

"Defence I suppose."

"But why is there a need for defence in the first place? What causes the opposition to defend themselves?"

"All sorts of reasons," I said, "Land, power, money, religion, race, law, resources. Loads of things."

"What does it boil down to?"

I was finding this very difficult to pinpoint.

"People wanting... more power, I suppose."

"Do you mean power for their people, or just power for themselves?"

"Well, they'll say it's for their people but everyone knows they're only in it for themselves."

"So you are saying that the problems exist because of selfishness?"

"I don't know... do they?"

"What do you think?"

"That's probably most of the problem, yes. I think most people seem to be selfish. But that's the way it's always been..."

"Ah," said Zeus, "That's the way it's always been is it? Is that in itself a reason to continue that selfishness?"

"Well we should try not to be, of course. Some people aren't. But most people are. The rulers, at least, seem to be." To be honest I don't think I was entirely sure what I was talking about.

"OK. So why do you think people are selfish? Or rather, what

do you think there is a lack of in society?"

I stuttered.

"I'll leave you to dwell on it all," said Zeus.

"Well... I don't really know about any of this. I haven't got a clue. I'm powerless. I'm just the general public – well, nowadays I am."

"I'll leave you to dwell on it," he repeated.

"Just a moment – you were saying something about lying over how soon the nuclear war would be?"

"Well recalled," he answered, "Now I won't give you an exact date but it's... well, sooner than you think. Nothing to worry about though. Nothing at all."

I was already worrying. I, Oberon Furrow, was the only one to know that there would be a nuclear war in the very near future. It all sounded so absurd. But I knew, given who had told me, that it was true.

"But what do I do?"

"Well," said Zeus, "in one universe, it has to happen. You can only change it for a different universe, but since it's going to happen anyway, there seems to be no point. Don't panic. You'll be safe."

Unsure exactly what I should be saying, I whispered "Thank you."

"Now then," said Zeus, rubbing his hands, "what would you like for lunch, and whereabouts would you like it?"

The thought of bon-dellee pudding began to cheer me up instantly.

"Er, no, Oberon," said Zeus, "No bon-dellee pudding for you, I think."

"But why ever not?"

"Renunciation, Oberon. There are people starving in your world. Goodbye."

As cryptically as he had first appeared to me, however many weeks ago it was, Zeus vanished, and I soon found myself making my way to bed, where I lay staring at the ceiling, my hands resting behind my head. I'd no idea where Zeus had vanished to. I had no idea what Zeus's home looked like. Did he even have a home? There were still so many questions, and now I knew, there may be so little time to ask them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"This must be stopped!"

"But we cannot possibly expect a being so far superior to us to adhere to our laws."

"There's no unjust and futile about it."

"That would be unjust and futile; and I'd have thought that were perfectly plain."

"I don't care," snapped the being, "It's our world at stake if space-time-probability is punctured so liberally. It's *our* world that may be at stake if these hostile 3D communities find out, and no I'm not afraid of them – you know that only too well."

"You're not afraid of them are you?"

The being was already enraged. "I'm only thinking of the safety of the people and the security of my reputation."

"Might I suggest," interjected another being, "that we call upon the trouble-maker in question... what is his name?"

"He has no name," came the reply, "but I believe that within the lesser universes he is simply known as... Zeus, Zeus Ganymede."

"Did you call?" said Zeus, who had appeared abruptly on the scene, shocking the assembly of beings to unrest.

"Zeus Ganymede," said the beforehand enraged being, who was now trembling with fright, "You have been brought here by the High Court of our universe, in the humble dimensions five... I'm afraid we're to be interrupted—"

"Tell me," interrupted a 4D man of the law, "are you present as a cross-section or as a computerised image?... Oh I see. Sorry for the interruption."

"You don't want me interfering do you?" said Zeus.

"Excuse me," replied the being, looking at the others with a confused expression but determined to seem masterful towards Zeus, "but that wasn't supposed to happen in the immediate future."

"You forget that I see more than immediacy, Sir."

"Yes, so you know the outcome of this meeting! What is it, Zeus?"

"You will forget about the entire matter and let me go."

"Oh? Not likely, I don't think. This is serious business and it needs to be sorted. To the point: you have been interfering with the lives of three-space-dimensional beings. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand that this is a breach of four-space-dimensional law?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that the maximum penalty for this offence is transcendental ostracism?"

"Yes."

"Which is pointless," another being piped up, "might I add? Zeus can jump between universes of five, six or more dimensions with ease."

"Yes thank you Zoblad," said the being impatiently.

"Could I also add please," continued Zoblad, "if you don't mind, that four-dimensional law does not necessarily apply to ten-dimensional beings."

"I was getting to that," the being snapped again, "But the trouble, Zeus, is that if you interfere with the lives of three-dimensional beings then they will become suspicious. You know what it means don't you? Two things: you'll rupture the fabric of space-time-probability and you will bring about unrest and hostility in the 3D world. They could sneak their way through wormholes you've left lying around; they may be let loose on our world! They may attack - you don't know what they're like - you know. They may be caught in a gravitational instability and be wiped out. Then where should we be, Zeus?"

"Zeus can see everything simultaneously," said another law being, "so he couldn't leave wormholes lying around."

"And," said Zoblad, "there would be no point in their attacking. Remember that even a baby 4D being could wipe out an entire civilisation – it's child's play."

"I'm well aware of that," said the being, "Now Zeus, with how many 3D people have you been interacting?"

"One, Sir. I have told him about the rest of civilisation, and I have explained to him the concepts of higher dimensions. No, I have not told him the answers to the... how shall I put it? - Universe's Mysteries. The 3D people aren't so interested in them."

"I see. Could I ask the Court for their opinion on these matters please? Zoblad, second, if you would."

"With all due respect," said Zoblad, "I think that it is really

none of our business. The tenth dimension is the tenth dimension, and it has the supreme advantage over every race, even us, despite our legal position in society. I think we should leave the matter alone and wait for further developments, of which there may be none. Are they to be any future developments, Zeus?"

"There is one tiny development, yes," explained Zeus, with a slight smug smirk, "You see, on the four nonillion three hundred and twenty octillion four-hundred and thirty-two thousand septillion six-hundred and ninety-four thousand two-hundred and fifty-six sextillion five-hundred and thirty-four thousand eight-hundred and forty-five quintillion one thousand one hundred and fifty-two quadrillion seven-hundred and eighty-two thousand four-hundred and eighty-six trillion six-hundred and forty-two thousand four-hundred and twenty billion eight-hundred and fifty-three thousand two-hundred and one million nine-hundred and seventy-two thousand eight-hundred and fifty-sixth Planck unit, the planet in question will be engaged in a nuclear war, that will... if you catch my immediate conclusion..."

The attendants of the High Court looked at each other in awe, and there was an awkward silence for a probable period of imaginary time. The master of the court looked back to Zeus, who exhibited a broad smile back at him.

"Why didn't you just *say* next week?"

"I have to be precise about these things. One of your weeks is about five and a quarter of their days, and they are quite short days, I can tell you. So there isn't much time left for them."

Zeus elaborated on the subject, explaining all the consequences of the event.

"Why didn't you say before?"

"You didn't ask."

"But you knew that I would ask, didn't you? You can see the non-immediate future for goodness's sake."

"I know," Zeus said, looking smug, pleased that he had annoyed the High Court. "I did. You didn't."

"In that case," said the master, "we shall leave it. You may go, Zeus."

But Zeus had already gone. He called back, "Thank you," before returning to the tenth dimension in his everyday state.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lightning invaded the skyline. Rain lashed down on the landscape, igniting a scraping cacophony on the roofs of the households and vehicles. The Earth was still rotating. The planets were still orbiting. A few thousand people across the world died of malnutrition. The sun continued shining, but little light seemed to be reaching the ground.

Cars queued up in hordes. I looked out of my window. The waters rose in the background. I heard shouting from the streets. A flashback: shouts, screams, people running, rain, queues of vehicles, bombs. There was one thing missing. I went downstairs to look out the living room window. A dirty, laminated notice flapped in the wind, nailed to a lamppost just outside my door. 'Houses over the road to be demolished to make way for high-rise tower block accommodation.'

I switched on a lamp in the corner of the room. A dim glow projected hope into the room, and materialised as Zeus, who was stood in black robes and a menacing squire's hat. Hope was spent, and the light silently extinguished to zero. Zeus removed his hat with both hands, then threw it, as one throws a discus, across the room, whereupon it vanished through the wall.

"You face a dilemma do you not?" said Zeus coldly.
"Something has to be done, no?"

"I was just about to talk about that. I *do* think something must be done. The world is a terrible place – I mean this world – and I don't know what to do."

"It's 2026 is it not? If only something could have been done about twenty years ago. Alas, it's too late now."

On cue, the television switched itself on. The news.

"Those nations who have withdrawn their military support in the War are under heavy fire from the US. At such an angry time, there is considerably anxiety over the announcement that nuclear weaponry is being prepared for use by the USA and its remaining allies. In what has been described as the biggest scandal against society this century will see, world leaders made this shock broadcast today—"

The face of the US leader appeared.

"It may be a bit of a surprise to hear it from us now," he said, speaking full on at the camera, "but it's true: yes, you *are* living in a totalitarian society."

The UK leader appeared. "There's no point trying to hide things any more. The age of feigning democracy is now at an end."

We walked, Zeus and I, through the totalitarian society. People we passed were glum, silent and indifferently accepting it all – though admittedly nothing had visibly changed. People hid themselves from it in their cars, or under their umbrellas. We passed stray animals, sniffing around piles of litter. The propaganda billboards were illuminated with neon. We crossed streets, and passed dark alleyways, on an all too familiar route to an all too familiar public house.

"Why have we come here?" I asked.

Zeus scratched his head. "Because the brain directed signals to neurotransmitters that sent impulses through the nervous system that led to the legs, to move them in the direction of this process of bricks, mortar..."

"Yes, yes," I said, "but why a pub?"

We sat down. "It's crucial to the plot," Zeus answered. "Now what would you like to drink?" A pint of beer emerged through the surface of the table, rotating as it came up. "This?"

The pint morphed into a glass of orange juice.

"Or this?" Zeus suggested.

The orange juice morphed into a tall glass of mineral water.

"Sparkling water?"

I grabbed at the glass. "Yes!" It was making me dizzy! "Thank you." I took six large swigs in succession, quickly draining the glass.

"There's something I need to tell you, Oberon," Zeus said, "Something of which I think you ought to be aware."

"What is it?" I said, nervous, not wanting the already depressing ambience to be made any worse.

"Well, it was before I told you about myself that day at your house – before, for you, that is. A person – a Zirthiran – appeared to you on your television set – exclusively to you – and you met at the park in the early hours of the morning, where he appeared from a burning bush..."

"I'm sorry," I interjected, "I'm lost. I don't remember any of this."

"The Zirthiran erased part of your memory." I stared at Zeus. "You see, he conducted a survey on you. It's a survey that the

Zirthirans do every so often to check the knowledge levels of a randomly selected group of people on each planet. And they gave you that Corfizz Translator Device as a thank you present."

"What do you mean?" I writhed a little in my seat. The background noise of the pub had more or less faded away. "What sort of survey? What did they ask?"

"I'll tell you what they asked. I'll ask you the questions myself."

"I shall have to add this to my diary."

"Indeed. Now, the first question: if you timed yourself running from this end of the park to the other, and I timed you also, standing here, would our results be the same? I am assuming this is given that our reaction times are equal."

"That's the first question? Well, in theory, my answer would be yes."

"Now the second question:" Zeus continued, "Suppose I threw a ball, and suppose you know precisely its speed, the force I threw it with, the air resistance, and all of the gravitational influences nearby. Suppose you know everything physical about the situation. Every movement of the atmosphere, every fluctuation in wind speed and temperature and velocity. Could you, in theory, predict where the ball would land, with total accuracy?"

"And I know everything about the situation do I?" I asked, seeking clarification, "The air pressure, the mass of the ball, the wind, everything?"

"Yes."

"Again, in principle, I'd say yes."

"Now would your answer change if you replace the tennis ball with an electron or a stream of electrons?" I hesitated momentarily.

"I don't see why it would, no," he answered.

"The next question is quite interesting. How many dimensions are there of the Universe?"

"Ah, well I know more now don't I? There are ten. You've proved it to me. More or less."

"What is the largest planet in this solar system?"

"Er... Jupiter I think."

"What is the charge of an electron?"

"The charge of one? Of an electron?"

"Yes that's right," said Zeus, "You've forgotten what it means haven't you?"

"Yes. I... don't know."

"Who on this planet discovered the first laws of gravitation?"

"Isaac Newton I believe."

"That's the end of the test," Zeus said and hastily corrected himself: "I mean survey. It's the end of the survey. Do you want to know your scores?"

I paused. "Yes... please."

"OK. Now when the Zirthiran gave you the test you scored forty percent. Today you scored sixty percent because of the question on dimensions. The only other questions you had correct were the ones about about Isaac Newton, and Jupiter being the largest planet in this solar system."

"Are you telling me that you can never predict precisely where a tennis ball will land even if you know absolutely everything about the situation?"

"Yes. It's a purely hypothetical situation, and is a consequence of quantum mechanics. It's highly likely that with a tennis ball you could get very close to the right answer, and in human means of measurement, it would certainly seem like the right answer, but with an electron or stream of electrons it becomes much more noticeable that it is utterly impossible."

"And the times differ if you time yourself and somebody stationary times you to run across a park?"

"Yes. That's because of relativity. Motion in space reduces motion in time, so when you run time goes slower for you."

"Right," I said, feeling that I needed more water. I looked down at the tall glass on the table. It had re-filled itself! I had a jolt to the system at seeing this, but had no trouble in downing the glass once more.

"Finally," said Zeus, "the electron has a negative electric charge."

"Oh yes," I said, "It's all come back to me. Electrons have a negative charge and balance the positively-charged protons in an atom, and neutrons have no charge."

"Ere," came a new voice from my right, "we won't have that sort of talk round 'ere."

It was the barman who had picked up the tall glass and was wiping it feebly with a cloth that would have been white if it weren't covered in dirt. It did not occur to the barman that he had not served them this mineral water.

"We're talking about science," said Zeus.

"What?" said the barman in a rough tone. He looked in his early-forties, hadn't shaved, took no care in how his hair looked, and had wrinkles all around his mouth, which seemed to restrict the amount by which he could open it. "Science?" he said as if it were banned in these parts, "What you talking about that for?"

The barman couldn't be bothered to hear the answer, so he put the glass back on the table and trotted off aimlessly. I was smiling, but when I turned back to Zeus sitting opposite me, I found him with a horrified expression on his face.

"We need to go," he said with a note of dire seriousness. He stood up. I stopped smiling with urgency and stood up too. I had no objections to leaving. "Come on," Zeus said again, "we have to go."

We marched speedily out of the pub. I stopped outside the door but Zeus was already striding quickly down the pavement. I had to run to keep up.

"Why don't we just van..." I began, but Zeus silenced me with a finger. We kept striding down the pavement. I felt hot, and I brushed my hair into a variety of positions with my hand, nervously. We passed a number of people on the pavement, none of which greeted us, and we were too engrossed in this purposeful marching to greet them ourselves. We didn't stop until we had reached my house and were safely inside the lounge with the door firmly shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"So, what exactly are you trying to tell me?" said Marcus Jule, struggling to understand.

"I know it's hard to comprehend; that's because it's hard to explain," I said, perhaps still a bit too pleased that I had secured another meeting with Mr. Jule. But I put my fullest attention to the problem. "You see, the English word 'poverty', when used with the Translator Device, seems to translate into a rather convoluted passage about *economics*."

"I see. So let me get this straight. Suppose you have one person – one human, sorry – living in... living over here," he said, using hand gestures to emphasise his logic, "Who lives a well-catered life. And then you have one person *here*, of the same species – are you sure there aren't two species of human?"

"Er... I'm pretty sure there's only one. Interesting thought though."

"Hmm. So this second person living *here* – by dint of the fact that she lives precisely *here* – has a quality of life that... what did you say?"

"Is close to... well, in many cases, close to... well, the English word 'starvation', you see, with the Translator Device, seems to translate into a rather convoluted passage about the nature of nutrition."

"Can you try to explain it?"

"Well, imagine a quantity of food that is just enough for you to stay alive..."

"Ah, so these people actually expire if they don't have enough food?"

"Well, so do we, Marcus. Technically."

"Right. So let's imagine a Zirthiran – sit down, Kivie – without a Brain Box, without an emergency supply of atto-nutrition, without even a J'nanator. OK? So then they're on the level of an Earth human. Right – now the food that they have available to them is *just enough* for them to stay alive. Now where do you go from there?"

"Well, now you imagine another Zirthiran who is also, as you say, on this same level as an Earth human," I explained.

"Right."

"In another part of the planet. And instead of having *just*

enough to live, they have a quantity that is *just less* than what is required to live, or at least, to live *comfortably*."

"Sorry – let me get this straight. You're saying that they've run out of food?"

"Well, any supply they may have had is exhausted, yes. And they then don't have enough. And gradually, this becomes known as 'malnutrition', I think, which means that they are not properly nourished."

"So when do they get more food? Are we talking about people with some bodily disability, relying on other people to bring them nutritional substances?"

"No. Not necessarily. They just *don't have* enough – or at least, not the means to get it."

"So what happens then?" he asked.

"Well, it is often appeased by aid from other places."

"Aid?"

"Apparently it is sent in by aircraft from other places. Other nations, to use the term described to me."

"What's a nation?"

"Well it's not really important right now. But food and other such supplies come from there."

"So why don't they have it already again?"

"It's a complex issue," I said, beginning to lose my understanding myself, "I think the gist of it is that people in these places do not receive enough care, and often rely on this 'aid' from other places."

"So this aid is always sent in to stop the problem?"

"Well, sometimes it isn't."

"It isn't?"

"Malnutrition will often spawn disease, and ultimately, death."

"Death? Surely you mean... what do you mean?"

"It's difficult," I said, "to get my head round it. Maybe I have my facts wrong."

"Do these other *places* – these other people who are not in this state of undernourishment – do they know about this? Because we would have to tell them."

"Yes they do."

"So obviously they're not letting people die are they?"

"Well..."

"Well of course not. Why would they do that? But why, also, is there such a divide between the people who have *enough*, and the people who *barely* have enough to live?"

"I'm not so sure about that."

"How long has this problem been going on? A few weeks? Months? When did this food start to run out?"

"Well, actually... it's been going on for quite some time."

"Then it must be nearly solved by now mustn't it? It's an interesting nugget of current affairs, yes, but actually I think there must be more pressing matters. For example, let me now tell *you* some news."

"Yes?"

"About Earth. Now this *is* a major crisis. Take a look at these maps and photographs from our remote wormhole telescopes." He slid some large documents over to the forefront of his desk for me to see. "We think we've got a handle on the situation. I think there's no doubt we'll be able to save them; they don't seem to have the technology to do it themselves. No doubt it's under construction, but we shan't take the risk."

I stared at the maps.

Now that *was* a major crisis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"What was all that about?" I gasped, suddenly becoming aware of a lack of oxygen.

"I'm sorry," said Zeus, and as if as a mere afterthought he conjured up an elegant marble coffee table bearing two tall glasses of tonic water. He sat down, and I was about to do the same when Zeus restrained me, explaining, "No point sitting down. You'll be getting up again." I was too out of breath to question this; instead I grabbed my glass of water and took a sip.

"Now for the reason that we rushed out of that place. You see, I didn't realise before, but I was far too engrossed in recounting the tale of the Zirthiran survey to you, to see everything."

"You're sorry you didn't realise *what*, exactly?"

"That we were being watched. Do you remember that I told you that someone is always watching? Well it's usually me, but nowadays when I'm on Earth I have to assume this three-dimensional form and my powers are limited, so... well, suffice to say, somebody else was watching."

"Who? Who?" I was becoming frustrated, but at the same time I was aware of blinking anxiously and breathing heavily.

"Miranda," he said. I sat down. It wasn't immediately obvious why this was a problem, but then it hit me.

"She saw you doing... she saw you conjuring things up. Did she hear what we were talking about?"

"I'm afraid so," said Zeus, "and I'm inclined to go and check what's going to happen in the future..."

"Just a moment," I said, "If Miranda saw you doing conjuring tricks and heard us talking about a Zirthiran survey, I'm either going to be branded as mad, and you, a mad magician, or that I'm in cahoots with some powerful magical influence. What am I to do?"

"Stay calm for one thing." He handed me a chocolate bar, "And don't panic."

"Right. Fine." I was taking deeper breaths.

"Actually," said Zeus, "start panicking. Miranda's at the door."

"What!" I exclaimed, "Quick! Change time! Do something!"

"Change time?" said Zeus.

"Yes!"

"Interfere with causality?"

"Yes!"

Zeus paused. "Let me just check that." Before I could do or say anything else, Zeus vanished, leaving me clutching air. The doorbell rang. It was as though it were signalling my demise, but I told myself to be sensible, and walked calmly to the front door. I took one last deep breath, then opened it, revealing the figure of the journalist, Miranda.

"Mr. Furrow?" she said, with an almost, but not quite, blank expression. "We've met before."

"Yes."

"I'd like to talk to you... about your work. May I come in?" She looked around cautiously. I invited her in to the living room. My hands were clammy. I clenched them into fists.

"Would you like, er, something to drink?" I asked, as politely as I could, "There's, er, still water..." and I realised that that was *all* there was – I hadn't really purchased anything since Zeus's arrival, "Or moving water..."

"Actually I could do with some water, if you would."

"So could I," I said, and strode off to the kitchen. I was trying to delay the inevitable conversation about the 'magic' in the pub for as long as possible.

I found Zeus in the kitchen when I entered. He was sitting on the table. I prepared the drinks as he spoke, adding two ice cubes to one glass, and three for me to try to cool me down.

"No," Zeus whispered, "The course of events must not be altered. Do you know what happens if I do that?"

"I can't see the future," I said. Zeus did not respond to this.

"When you 'change' time, inclusive of when you erase a memory, you enter a parallel universe, separate from the one in which the natural events occur. And so in this universe Miranda still knows about Zeus. She devotes the rest of her life to finding out more about me, and discovers a wormhole that leads to Zirth. From there she enters the parallel universe where we are and has a long argument with you, and tries in vain to kill me. We don't want to go there."

"So we're stuck with this universe?" I said.

"Yes," said Zeus, clearing his throat at the same time.

"I'll help where I can," Zeus concluded, before vanishing. I walked quickly back to the lounge where Miranda had made herself

comfortable on the settee. I laid the glasses down on the marble coffee table.

"Thank you," she said, taking the glass with the three ice cubes. I sat down with the other drink and took a few gulps. "Now," she began, with an almost imperceptible tremble, "Your work. You see, it's most satisfactory – more than that, in fact – and as an auditor I believe I can say with confidence that yours is the fastest and most efficient bookkeeping the industry has seen."

"Well thank you very much," I said, "I do my best."

"But that's the problem, you see. I think it's *too* good."

"Too good? But how can it possibly be *too* good?" Was that tautological enough?

"I think," she said, now whispering, "that the industry could well be ready for a bit of..." and here she leant forward, as though revealing a deep and ominous secret, the kind of secret that forms a life-changing plot twist in a psychological thriller, the kind accompanied by the tensest of tension-building orchestral music that builds into an unbearable crescendo, and preceding an abrupt, shocking scene change depicting full-scale industrious activity of an unmistakably surrealistic kind – helicopters with searchlights, bridges that swap positions, or ancient tomb doors opening in a splendour of pyrotechnics and mystical sound effects.

"...the occult."

Thankfully Miranda is not part of a psychological thriller.

"The what?" I said. She leant back.

"Oh, don't try to tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. You harbour a secret – a deep, dark, ominous secret – the kind of secret that forms a life-changing plot twist in a psychological thriller."

"What," I said, trying to keep cool, "the kind accompanied by the tensest of tension-building orchestral music that builds into an unbearable crescendo?"

"That's the one. You know it, and I know you have it, and you know that. You must reveal it, for the good of... of mankind: it could well revolutionise the way that we work and the way that we live."

"OK," I said, "Yes I do have a secret. But..."

"Yes?"

"The thing is..."

"Yes?"

"Let me refill our glasses." I swiped the glasses from the table and hurried into the kitchen before she could protest. The door of the freezer suddenly fell open, and Zeus backed out from inside it. I nearly dropped the glasses on the floor.

"I don't know what to do," I said to Zeus, "She's getting me to tell her everything."

"Shh. I know," he said quietly. "What we need to do is frighten her off. You can leave everything to me."

"No – just a moment," I said, not paying attention to Zeus's suggestion, "I know what to do. Yes – I think I can handle it. Leave it to me."

I set off for the lounge, then stopped at the doorway, made a retreat, and collected the two glasses of water, which Zeus had refilled for me and was holding out to me in his hands. They both had three ice cubes.

I came into the living room again and set the glasses down. I took a few sips and sat down myself.

"You're trying to avoid it aren't you?" said Miranda.

"There's something you're trying to avoid too," I said. "You too have a secret you're keeping from me."

"Oh?"

"Although it's not a secret, in fact, because I know what it is."

"It is surely not as dark and ominous and life-changing as your own. I think you're just trying to change the subject and buy time."

I came out with it: "You're not an auditor."

"I beg your pardon?" she said, feigning offence.

"I said you're not an auditor. You're a journalist. That's what you were keeping from me. You just want the story so that you can sell it."

Her hand began fumbling in one of her jacket pockets.

"What are you fiddling with?" I asked, suspecting something.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "Nothing."

"I know it – you've been concealing something else as well."

She sighed. "All right," she said, bringing out the voice recorder from her pocket, "All right – so I've been recording the whole conversation." She removed the tape from the device, and then slung them back in her pocket. "I'm sorry. And I am a journalist. I've been tracking you for some time, Oberon. Right back to when you were in

office."

I perked up.

"In London? You mean – you know about all that?"

"Yes. You see, I have a special interest in unexplained events – the paranormal, the occult, unidentified objects – and lately they've been going on all around *me*. I used to write the columns, all about these highly questionable supernatural occurrences – and now that the *real* things are happening, it's too late: I was promoted, and now I'm doing stupid, domestic affairs. I tried to contact you when you were in that position. And I carried on trying to contact you when you moved. I knew it would make a story."

"It was years ago, though. It doesn't matter any more."

"Oberon, I'm not interested in showing up the civil service to trivial errors they made years ago, just to embarrass government. Oh no – I couldn't possibly do that in this day and age anyway. I'm interested in these weird and wonderful surrealistic events that have been happening – and I'm very interested to know if there's a connection between *them* and that little budget advice you gave to the chancellor all that time ago. But alas, my boss won't believe anything I say. He's sent me on vacation. I'm packing for Miami. Oh... I've seen a lot: I've seen a ski lift fall through the ceiling, I've seen people vanish through wormholes, I've seen people appearing and disappearing into thin air, I've seen pub drinks morph into other drinks, and..."

Suddenly there came the characteristic sound of an elephant trumpeting. It was an elephant that proceeded to appear from nowhere, and charge across the room. It vanished through the opposite wall.

"...and an elephant, stampeding through a living room,"

Miranda said, completing her sentence, transfixed on the spot where the elephant had emerged. There was a pause of a few seconds. In the distance there could be heard a rumbling sound, quite like thunder. The rumbling got louder and louder, until finally, the entire stampede of wild animals came pounding through the wall, across the room, and out again – zebras, cheetahs, baby rhinoceroses, panthers, marmosets – they followed the route of the elephant, kicking up dust as they sped through, in front of mine and Miranda's thunderstruck expressions.

When the dust from their wrath had diffused away, Miranda was left staring at a lone monkey, who has holding a single coconut. It sidled up to her, held out its load, and squeaked:

Justin Morgan

"Coconut?" before vanishing.

Miranda screamed. She strode out into the hallway. I followed.

"I have to go," she said. Before I could answer, she had opened the door, and looked at me: "I'll be back, Oberon. I'll be back."

She fled from the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I was at work the next day. I'd long since got over the anxiety about scaring away Miranda like that: after all, it was Zeus's idea; it couldn't have been a dangerous thing to happen, could it?

"Now where was I?" I was muttering to myself as I rummaged wildly through the drawer on the bottom left of the desk, actually trying to reinstate a bit of normality and 'routine' to my life. I pushed aside an abundance of ledgers and cash books and invoices and names and addresses in large folders. It was almost as untidy as the political system.

"This one," said Zeus, removing a folder of invoices from August and handing it to me.

"Thank you."

I removed the topmost document from the folder. In large letters it read: 'This folder was selected for you by Zeus Ganymede.'

"Very funny," I said, not laughing, and put the message aside, where it promptly vanished. I continued to remove the second document – a genuine invoice. I had just started its database entry when, glancing at the screen, I noticed it was already in the database. "It's already here!" I exclaimed.

"I put it in for you," said Zeus, adding, "just now."

"Thank you, but..." I said, shaking my head to finish the sentence, and feeling that there was little point in my actually being there.

"That's not true!" Zeus protested at this thought. "Well, actually, I suppose..."

"Yes, it doesn't matter Zeus," I said, trying to avoid that conversation. Zeus made a gesture towards the back of the room where the staircase was. I felt instinctively that Zeus meant someone was coming.

Footsteps grew louder and louder until the figure of John Eaves appeared. He stopped right next to Zeus. Zeus strafed aside, to reveal to me that John was standing with a puzzled look on his face.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Um..." replied Mr. Eaves, "well... not really, no." I looked to Zeus, and was startled to see him, for no reason I could fathom, holding a hare by its ears. I laughed aloud. "Is something funny?" said John.

"No," I said innocently, my lips hastily becoming straight as ever, "Nothing."

"Oh." Mr. Eaves sat down opposite my desk and switched on his computer. There was a pause.

I looked back to Zeus and found that he was no longer holding a hare. It was worse. He was holding a parrot - a small but significantly brightly coloured parrot perching on his wrist; Zeus's smile, meanwhile, was non-existent, as if holding a tropical bird was perfectly normal. I did not agree, and I laughed again.

"Look, Oberon," John began, in a serious tone, "there's something..." and he then turned to face me; I likewise turned to face him. He had evidently been completely oblivious to my laugh – I think his ignorance made him used to experiencing only that which was happening to himself. The sun peeped out from behind the clouds, illuminated the room for a second, and then hid behind them again. "There's something..." John repeated, but stopped.

"You want to talk about?" I suggested.

"Well... it doesn't matter. Forget it."

"OK then," I said quietly, returning to my work.

But I stopped. I opened a new text file, and typed: 'what was he thinking?' Then Zeus made the words appear on the screen, one after the other, 'Do you want me to read his mind?' I sighed, and without looking back at Zeus, typed, 'How else do you suppose you find out?' It was like a school game! Zeus replied: 'That's unethical, immoral and inhumane, Oberon,' to which I retorted: 'Yes but can you do it for me please?'

Zeus just put: 'Yes.'

After a few seconds, he put up the words: 'Just a moment.' I turned to look at him, at this point, and saw that he wasn't there. Sean was there in his place.

"Sean!" I exclaimed, trying to look delighted that he was there. Sean had a cigarette in his hand, which was down by his side. He looked hot and bothered, despite its not being a particularly hot day (even with the climate change).

"Hello Oberon," said Sean, "What is that text file?" My senses jolted with worry (I'm a worrier) when he began to quote it: "Do... you want me to... read his..."

I clicked the close button as fast as possible. However, horror

of all horrors, the dialogue box appeared, asking if I wanted to save my changes! And it did not cover the end of the sentence that Sean was reading.

"...mind," Sean concluded, just as I pressed the 'No' button. "What does that mean?"

"It's nothing," I hastened to put in.

"It's very strange nothing, Oberon. Something to do with filing cabinets that can read your mind, maybe," said Sean, and then went over to John's desk to talk, without pursuing the issue further. I let out a sigh of relief, and carried on with the work, thinking how much it seemed that Sean just loitered around his employees for his own amusement, no matter what strange and unnatural items caught his attention. He went away after about five minutes. Zeus reappeared next to me.

With a new text file, I typed: 'Why did you go away?' The words of his reply appeared in succession: 'I had to go back in time slightly and then read John's mind specifically,' after which I wrote 'Why didn't you tell me Sean was coming? He almost got suspicious of our conversation,' and Zeus answered simply: 'Well, it's a laugh isn't it?'

I looked back to Zeus, who was smirking. Then a thought occurred to me. I wrote it down: 'Why are we using text files to communicate? Why don't I just think things and you read my mind and reply?' Zeus answered, still in text on the screen: 'I don't know; this was your suggestion!'

I just shook my head, quit the program and continued working on the invoices in the database. Then I suddenly became aware of John Eaves looking at me – it was blurry, but apparent, in my peripheral vision, so I turned around to face him. He immediately looked away, back at his computer screen: odd, I thought.

"Yes it is," said Zeus.

"You don't need to respond to every thought I have!" I thought. Zeus said nothing.

In the coffee break, John got up immediately and walked off. I simply sighed again and sat back in my chair. Zeus conjured up a cup of hot chocolate.

"Thank you," I thought.

"Oh," said Zeus, "and I wish you wouldn't keep referring to the

'conjuring' up of objects - I'm not a magician and I don't conjure things up. I transport them from a higher dimension: that's all."

"Sorry," I said.

"It wasn't *your* fault," came a new voice from my left. I turned to see a man who had dropped a cup of hot chocolate on the floor.

"No," I said, "I know."

"You're Oberon Furrow aren't you?" said the man, "I... are you..." The man was pointing at me and wore a puzzled expression, similar to the one Mr. Eaves had had previously.

"I am Oberon Furrow, yes."

"Hmm," said the man, "I'll go and get a cloth," and he strode off with haste. Zeus, meanwhile, pointed at the spilt hot chocolate, whereupon it peeled itself from the floor, poured up through the air, and gathered itself back in the plastic cup in which it had arrived, before disappearing completely. I saw that it had actually reappeared in Zeus's hand. Zeus took a sip of it and then threw the cup behind him; it vanished in mid-air. I applauded Zeus's marvel by clapping.

"I've only got a cloth," came the man's voice, "Nothing to celebrate." The man had returned carrying a pink cloth. He looked down at the ground. "It's gone! It's clear!" He hurried off before anything could be said to him.

'I must start *thinking* instead of *saying*,' I thought to myself.

"Yes," said Zeus, "perhaps you should."

'Now, why, Zeus, did you allow him to see that the hot chocolate had disappeared?'

"I wanted a taste."

'You could have put it back afterwards.'

"All right. If you don't want me to interfere, you can rectify the situation by putting the spilt hot chocolate back." Zeus made a plastic cup, almost overflowing with hot chocolate, appear in his hand, and he handed it to me.

'You mean you want me to *spill* it?'

Zeus had gone (all this vanishing and appearing was really putting my nerves on edge; and making me dizzy!) I panicked, and decided to throw the cup's contents into the corridor quickly...

...whereupon it hit the man that had just returned, accompanied by Sean.

"What on Earth?!" said Sean, directing a disgusted look at me.

I turned back to Sean and the soaking man.

"I..." I began, but I could no more think of an excuse for why I had suddenly thrown a cup of hot chocolate over a colleague than I could spontaneously cause a gibbon from Honolulu to self-combust.

"What is going on?" asked Sean, "Lee came to me. He told me that he'd spilt some hot chocolate. When he came to wipe it up, he claims, it vanished. So now I have arrived to inspect the situation, and... I find there is not hot chocolate on the floor, but fresh hot chocolate thrown over Lee instead!"

"I'm ever so sorry," I said. I looked around for help. No-one was there to give it.

"I don't know what to say," said Sean.

"Neither do I," said Lee.

"Actually," I said, "apart from how sorry I am, I can't either."

"So we're all speechless," Sean concluded. "Oh well. Go and wash up, Lee."

Lee went away to wash up. Sean took a breath as if he were about to speak, but then he stopped, sighed, shook his head and walked away too.

Without any warning I found myself underneath a desk, on the floor. Zeus was there with me.

"What's this about?" I whispered. Zeus pointed to the opening beneath the desk's legs.

I looked out cautiously from beneath the table. At a desk that was diametrically opposite us, John Eaves was talking in a hushed voice to another colleague that I didn't recognise. However, while I could not hear everything they said, I could certainly pick out my own name when I heard it.

"I'll amplify the sound for you," said Zeus. I crawled closer to the scene anyway, so that I was now in front of Zeus. I felt the carpet was extremely coarse, and it was covered thickly in dust. Drawing my attention away from the floor were the voices that I could now hear quite clearly:

"I was told this in confidence," said John, "so don't tell anyone else about it."

"What happened, exactly, in this pub?" asked the man with whom he was conversing.

"Well, apparently, according to this woman anyway, Oberon

was talking to thin air, and different drinks appeared in front of him from nowhere." I flinched at hearing my own name again, especially in this revealing context.

"I can't understand how that can be."

"Then how do you explain the other spooky things that happened this morning? Haven't you heard Lee's story?"

"Well surely you can't trust the source, when the source is Lee?" said the man, somewhat spitefully.

"Who would be insane enough, though, to come up with something so... stupendously crazy? Even if Lee is the unintelligent oaf that he is, I can't imagine him as an eccentric."

"And despite Victor being a bit of a fool, I think he can be trusted to know when something fishy is going on."

I was getting quite cross at how unpleasant they were being about Lee and Victor, and at the same time nervous because people were getting this suspicious.

"So what was all this to-do about the hot chocolate then?" said the man.

"Well that was when he spilt some hot chocolate, you see; he left for a bit, and when he came back, he thought it had vanished from the floor. Now, you see, Oberon somehow got hold of another, and then... for no reason we can fathom, just chucked the whole lot over Lee as he was coming back in to show Sean."

The man was chuckling. "What a bunch of idiots!"

I had heard enough. I crawled backward a little. I suddenly heard another voice, making me hit my head on the underside of the desk in surprise. It was louder than the other voices around me, and, yes, it was directed at me. I turned to see the face of the owner of the desk – a woman with a pale, pinched face and black, bedraggled hair. I turned for Zeus's guidance. He wasn't there.

"Are you looking for something?" she asked.

"Er... yes," I said, getting out from underneath the table and brushing myself down. I avoided looking at the two men on whom I had been eavesdropping. "I think it's upstairs though."

"Can I help at all?" she said, "I'm Muriel by the way". I blushed slightly, and smiled at her. The woman had long blonde hair that seemed to have a life of its own as it waved around slowly in a non-existent breeze. Her eyelashes were as long as her painted

fingernails which was, to say the least, the longest I had ever seen.

"No," I said, "that's fine, thank you. It's not anything detrimental."

"Right."

As I walked off towards the staircase, I seemed automatically to look at John and the other person. They were staring at me as if I might explode at any moment. I felt as though I could.

When I got back to my desk, I had to deal with Zeus.

"Where did you go this time?"

"You don't need me to accompany you everywhere do you? Can you not fend for yourself?"

"Of course I can, but it was rather embarrassing," I admitted.

"Don't dwell on it. Don't worry about it. For goodness sake, why can you not just laugh at it, Oberon? It's funny. It isn't anxiety-provoking, neither is it meant to be. If you take life that seriously you'll have a nervous breakdown."

I thought for a while. "Yes I suppose you're right. It was rather funny. Me, under the desk, and them, having seen and heard about all these things that they can't explain, only to see the perpetrator of these events emerge from the table as though it were all perfectly natural. It's hilarious!"

And before I knew it, I was laughing with Zeus over the hilarity and ridiculousness of the whole situation.

"I don't think it's particularly funny," came the voice of Lee, who was standing right behind me, holding a cloth that was dripping wet with hot chocolate. "It's actually rather serious."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I wasn't laughing at you. I was thinking of something else."

"Oh I see," said Lee, walking into the corridor, "Your life must be packed full of excitement." He walked away to the left. Then he returned walking in the correct direction - to the right.

Just as I was about to start laughing again, Fred arrived (incidentally, I had not yet worked out exactly what Fred's job title was. This immediately suggested he worked somewhere in the management team).

"What account are you working on now?" asked Fred.

"I'm finishing the last invoices of the Magician company."

"Great. Keep at it. I wonder what happened to John." It was at

this point that I realised the coffee break had ended long ago, and that Mr. Eaves was still not there. Perhaps he was extending his conversation with that friend of his. That was a bit of a risk on his part, I thought, but never mind. Fred walked off and stepped briskly down the staircase.

I continued with the invoices, in no great hurry. John returned to his desk twenty minutes late. I did not pursue his reasons, and John seemed to be making a special effort to avoid contact with me. After a couple of hours of this ignorance, it came to lunch time. Mr. Eaves stopped work as soon as the time came – I think he was in the middle of typing a sentence. He rushed away.

"Zeus," I said, "What do you think about all this? About John and these others knowing about the things that you've done? Will it come to anything?"

"Oberon," he answered with a very serious tone, "I can tell you in complete honesty: *no*. Their knowledge will not affect your life - there are other things that will do so far more prominently."

"What do you mean?"

He stayed silent, and I turned to see that somebody was passing through the corridor. When she had gone, Zeus spoke:

"We should go for lunch now. Where do you want to go?" I rubbed my hands, thinking of possible locations.

"Honolulu?" I suggested.

"That's the one," came a voice from behind me. I turned to see two men who had been having a discussion. "That's the capital of Hawaii, Joe. Thanks."

I was starting to get fed up of people hearing me say things to Zeus and mistaking it for something that I said to them. I continued conversing with Zeus in my head:

"Barbados? Ibiza? Barcelona? Cyprus?"

"Why not Crease, a very tropical area on Zirth?"

We were interrupted yet again when Sean came striding down the hallway, approaching me with a neutral expression on his face. He was still carrying a cigarette in the hand that was down by his side. Then, the strangest thing happened: he started talking, but no sound emerged from his mouth. He was moving his lips, and his tongue, but making no noise. I turned to look at Zeus for explanation; he was just laughing, but I could not neglect Sean.

"Sorry?" I interrupted, "I couldn't hear."

"Oberon, I've lost something," came the sound of Sean's voice, but this time, the sound was not in sync with the mouth movements he was making. It sounded as though the voice was coming from all directions. I looked to the ceiling. "Do you happen to know where there is a blue folder? The blue folder has 'Private' and 'Confidential' stickers on it."

"What's inside it?" I asked, feeling awkward and not knowing what to say. Zeus, meanwhile, found it very amusing. I tried to see the funny side too.

"I said do you know where there is a blue folder?" came Sean's words. "Well, it won't be on the ceiling will it?"

"Eh?" I said.

"What's inside the ceiling? How do I know? I want to know about the blue folder." Sean was making gestures now as though he were speaking to a someone deaf.

"I don't follow."

"Folder - Blue - Private and Confidential - Lost."

"I haven't seen it." Then Sean waved a hand dismissively, and walked off back down the staircase.

"Oh never mind," came the out-of-sync words of Sean, "Forget it."

"What was all that about Zeus?"

"That was about your boss being out-of-synchronisation."

"Yes I know that!" I snapped, getting frustrated. "Why though?"

"It's a laugh isn't it?" said Zeus, "If you want your life to be boringly ordinary every day, then perhaps I should leave you here when the war comes to this area."

It suddenly came back to me. It came back with the jolt of a slice of frozen bon-delle pudding hitting the back of the throat while being hit on the head with a sledgehammer. The war was closing in.

"None of this matters, Oberon. Think more about what we were saying about the utter vastness of the multiverse; in that perspective, nothing like this can *ever matter*."

"You're right," I said, believing it, "Of course, you're absolutely right." I laughed, almost hysterically, and then vanished. I reappeared. I was on a beach – yes, Miami beach.

Feeling as though a slice of frozen bon-delle pudding has hit the back of your throat while someone hits you on the head with a sledgehammer is bad enough, but the sensation of suddenly being transported from a drab workplace of the accounting industry to a lively, sunny location, envied for tourism worldwide, is quite another experience. Waves. Chatter. Resplendent blue sea. Distant towers and skyscrapers. Rolling sands stretching into the distance. Quite a contrast from Yenom Accounting.

We stood silent for a while, taking in the scenery and activity around us from all directions. It didn't take too long before Zeus decided it was his turn to have some serious fun, in a style that, literally, only Zeus could master. He outstretched a hand to the sea, and I noticed a surge of turbulence forming in the water. The surfers seemed quite oblivious to it, that was, until it rose higher and higher so that you could barely see the sky beyond. Visitors to the beach were now beginning to flee, and others just stood on in horror and amazement at the mini-tsunami that had formed itself in front of their very eyes.

With a flick of the wrist, Zeus caused the wave to cease its movement. It was frozen, frozen in time and upright - so still was it, in fact, that the surfers who were there at the time could just walk straight through it to access the beach. The sight of this majestic but perturbing image was the source of much chatter right across the beach. Many were talking of 'miracles' and 'hallucinations' and of being told countless times that they shouldn't have had that 'one last beer'. But the bafflement and the sheer incredulous stupefaction of seeing a frozen-in-time tidal wave was no match to the astonishment caused at Zeus's next trick.

Over to the right from the edge of the beach, a dolphin could be seen diving in and out of the waters. Only a handful of people were watching it. Then, when the dolphin reached the giant wave it did something that made the already agape faces of the crowd electrify with awe and bewilderment. The dolphin leapt from the surface of the sea, and rocketed steeply upwards, right over the top of the static wave. Gasps from the crowd chorused. As the dolphin passed over the curve on the tip of the wave, the wave began its passage through time again, but it was no longer heading for the beach. The dolphin was heading for the beach, and at the same time the wave was toppling

backwards towards the sea it had come from, as though its stillness had spent the momentum necessary for it to break on the shore. As the wave crashed down to the sea, it caused a monumental spray that drenched everybody on the beach, and while they were shielding themselves, nobody noticed the vanishing dolphin.

"Wow!"

"What?!"

"I do not believe it!"

"This is incredible!"

Such were the cries of the people, until somebody shouted:

"Where did the dolphin go?!"

Then there were cries of:

"My goodness!"

"God in heaven!"

"What happened?" And then some teams of people began frantic searches of the beach to try and find the dolphin; some people were fleeing the site in terror; the surfers went back to their surfing, some of them claiming that they'd catch that wave again. Journalists and reporters had already arrived and were interviewing people. I spotted video cameras, and film crews.

Zeus was laughing. Nobody, of course, knew that any of this had anything to do with an accountant from the UK and a ten-dimensional being that knew the entire future of the universe.

"Let's see how far we can push them," Zeus said quietly to me. Without further ado, there was a large bang, and everyone looked up to the source. Fireworks! All manner of colours had just begun exploding in broad daylight above them. Zeus even made one of the fireworks resemble the shape of a dolphin. This caused an unimaginable stir amongst the crowd. Children were riveted, and everyone was craning their neck and their camera lenses to see the display...

...which meant that they didn't see Zeus and I spontaneously vanishing in a puff of purple smoke...

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Another revolution went by, and another, and another. It revolved and revolved in hazes of blue and green - on and on and on, not stopping for breath, pulling its contents through the passage of time mercilessly. Very little notice was taken of its revolving, but there, in the background it was, spinning alone in solitude. After many more hundreds of revolutions, the hamster stepped off its wheel, and strolled over to its food dish.

'Excellent,' thought the hamster, 'nourishment. He may not take much notice of me, but he does at least provide the necessary nourishment.'

"Mind the cage," said John Eaves, "It's Gaia, my hamster."

Three men stepped over the cage, and then John picked up the cage and took it to the other side of the room. The hamster began breathing erratically.

'Must they do that? Make me dizzy?'

Gaia had to stop eating momentarily, but recommenced as soon as the cage was safely on the ground. John turned his back on it and sat at the dining table opposite, with his two acquaintances. On the table was a videophone. It started ringing, and a static picture of the journalist called Miranda appeared on the screen. John pressed a button, vivifying the image of Miranda.

"Hello," she said, "I'm here, calling from Miami Beach."

'What do they get to eat?' the hamster thought, 'Something elegant and extravagant no doubt. Oh, one mustn't grumble if one has one's ample daily nourishment. The universe is just far too large to grumble in. You'd never think the rest of the universe existed, to be honest, because those - human thingies - never consider it.'

"So what is the plan?" said Victor.

"Well what is there to do? We need to get to the bottom of all this somehow; I don't know how. Something fishy's going on and we know it. Any ideas, Jack?"

'They're far more interested in fishies!' thought Gaia, tutting.

"Nah," said Jack, "Dunno."

"Well," said Victor, "There's something I haven't told you about yet. It's something that could reveal a lot. It's not that I believe it or anything, but Oberon mentioned it."

"Oh yes?" said John, raising his eyebrows in interest, "What is

it?"

'I'll think I'll retire to bed. I'll have to go up the tubular path. It's a funny old tubular path, you know. It's an orangey-red translucent plastic tube and yet it's very easy to traverse. I'd like to see a human try to traverse it though. That would be quite amusing, I can say.'

The hamster climbed through the tubular system to its sleeping area, and Victor finished his account of the secret.

"Zeus," repeated John, "Zeus. That rings a bell from somewhere."

"God of some sort? Roman myth or something?" said Jack.

"Yes," said Miranda, "Zeus is the *Greek* mythological king of the gods. The Roman equivalent is Jupiter."

"Oh that's it," said John. "I was just about to correct you, Jack."

"And he said that Zeus could read minds and tell the future," explained Victor.

'Oh,' thought Gaia, 'they're talking about that ten-dimensional being. Well, I wish I could tell them all about it, but alas, the intellect and indeed sentience of hamsters is so unjustly overlooked.' She sighed.

"Did he really?" said John, then changed his tone, "Did he? Well that's hardly believable is it? Read minds? Tell the future! Ha!" And all the men around the table started laughing too. Miranda was silent. Between guffaws, Jack put in:

"That's about as believable as a bird getting a lift with a pig because they fly faster!"

'My bedding materials are getting a bit scarce! That's not very good is it? Oi, you up there! Master!' The hamster made some squeaking sounds.

The men stopped laughing, but ignored the hamster.

"Now Miranda, you're sure you can get this story in the papers?"

"Considering there's no evidence," John added.

"Evidence isn't a problem for the press, John; but getting my boss to agree to this story has so far been very difficult."

"But there is evidence," Victor pronounced, "The Miami Beach incident is perfect evidence. Then all we need to do is get me and Lee to make a statement about what we've seen and heard, and they'll surely print that? And, we'll give them Oberon's address so that it can

be followed up. That way we don't really need to get involved any further."

"Oh, just a moment," said Miranda. Her mobile 'phone was ringing. "It's the boss. I'll put it on speaker-phone." She allowed the conversation to be heard through the videophone.

"Miranda," said her boss, with a note of urgency, "Where are you?"

"I'm in Miami as you suggested."

"You've heard about the incident?"

"I saw it all. I was sunbathing, and..."

"Great! We must get this story. Having an eyewitness... that's what every newspaper is after right now. Good thinking of mine to send you to Florida wasn't it?"

"Well, in hindsight, yes..."

"No, I foresaw it all. I know where the big stories are happening. Get back as soon as you can: we need a fuller report."

"But I thought you said it was all nonsense. I thought you thought that all this supernatural business was just... untrue?"

"No no no! That's not true – I crave the extraordinary."

"So I can add the reference to the extraordinary events that have happened in the past, and Oberon's little 'mistake' when he worked for the chancellor?"

"But they're irrelevant!"

"I can always have been somewhere other than Miami," said Miranda slyly, "I could easily have gone to... let's say, Prague?"

"You know..." said the boss, "On second thoughts, I think those other stories *are* relevant. Other newspapers will be saying *what* happened, but we put the blame on Oberon – we say *why* it happened. That was good thinking Miranda; I want you to get on to it straight away."

"I knew you'd see sense. Thank you."

He hung up. Miranda put her thumbs up to her audience, who were smiling ecstatically.

"Great! Well done Miranda!"

'That sounds vaguely sinister,' thought Gaia, 'Oh well. What help can I be? I'm only a hamster. A hamster without ample bedding. Poor me.'

* * *

Zeus had opened my eyes to the possibilities - the endless opportunities, literally, that were there in the Universe. I had all this power, but was at the same time humbled – humbled in comparison to Zeus, and even more so in comparison with the great tree of possibilities that was the multiverse.

The following day came quickly and swiftly as usual. It was another workday. The rain was torrential, and the clouds were more black and menacing than I had ever seen them in my life. Thunder and lightning ripped through the sky, creating a cosmic schism that mirrored the schism in society down here on earth. But I did not want the weather - of all things - to spoil the fun. I remembered all of the events of the last day in a dream-like manner. They had certainly felt like dreams. I even recalled the less exciting but nonetheless amusing times when people had mistaken my conversations with Zeus with conversations with them. I remembered the hot chocolate incident with Lee...

...and then I remembered the conversation that my colleague John Eaves had had with that man on the ground floor of the bookkeeping offices. They had been discussing the miraculous events that had happened when I was at the pub, the ones that Miranda had seen. If someone had spotted me at the beach in Miami, then people would get even more suspicious...

However, this was just nervous and pessimistic thinking again, wasn't it? Zeus wanted me to forget all that. After all, destruction was coming. Well, that just depressed me even more, thinking of that. Can a person ever be satisfied? And what would happen to me in the wake of nuclear warfare? What would happen to mankind?

I had an instinct to warn people. Suddenly frozen-in-time waves and super-dolphins did not matter against the destruction of the country. Or the world.

That morning, Zeus suddenly appeared in the centre of the living room - the exact centre, that is - i.e. he was floating in the air a short distance from the carpet. I was so shocked that I backed straight into the glass cabinet of ornaments I had. The handles of the cabinet jammed into my back and sent bursts of pain rushing up my spine.

"I'll fix that," said Zeus, as he gradually floated to the floor. As

his feet hit the ground, the pain just vanished. "Anyway," Zeus continued as if nothing had happened, "there's no need to worry about this terrestrial destruction, you know. Don't let it trouble you. I won't tell you why, but I'll tell you it's nothing to be concerned about."

"No," said Oberon, "but I want to tell people. I think I should. I'd never forgive myself otherwise."

Then the doorbell went. I glanced out of the window, but the person was awkwardly concealed behind the porch, out of view.

"It's a woman from the neighbourhood," said Zeus, "You don't know her, but her name's Mrs. Kennard."

"OK; thanks Zeus."

I opened the doors and Mrs. Kennard stepped into the porch. She was a lady probably in her mid-fifties...

"Mid-forties actually," said Zeus (I now had confirmation that he was invisible and inaudible).

...She had long, matted hair that seemed stringy and wiry, and the wrinkles on her face were concentrated around her lips and eyes. She was slim and quite bony, but was making an attempt at a smile, though it seemed a little fearful. I had never spoken to her before, but knew she was from the neighbourhood. Until now, we had completely ignored each other - it was the same with everyone in the village (in fact, I couldn't even remember the names of the next-door neighbours).

"I saw you," Mrs. Kennard began, "in the newspaper this morning." Her voice was high-pitched, wiry and stringy, matching her hair, in fact.

"Oh?" I replied, "I haven't the read the newspaper yet." Mrs. Kennard produced the paper in question from behind her back and opened it to a middle page that she had been marking with a finger. It was just a local paper. There was a large article about a fight on the left, an article about a murder on the right, and several small ones about disease, death and economics (how strange to group these three subjects [or was it?]). There was a tiny article on the bottom right that was entitled: 'Stroud Man Present at Miami Miracle Scene.'

"Is it true you were there?" said the woman.

"Yes. I was there," I said, "and I took a quick flight back as soon as it had finished."

"What on Earth did you think when you saw these things happening? I hear a lot of people fainted when they saw the dolphin

jump that high!"

"Did they?" I said, not recalling anybody fainting, "I was quite a long way off."

"It says here that you were at the core of the activity," Mrs. Kennard argued.

"You know how the papers exaggerate everything," I said with a smile.

"Well I'll see you around," said the lady, folding up her newspaper. She coughed twice before leaving the porch and did not say another word.

"Bye," I called, but she probably hadn't heard.

"You're right," said Zeus, "She didn't hear." I hesitated to slam both of the doors only to look at the new propaganda board being put up directly opposite my house – one of those stupid smoking adverts:

'You pollute outwardly...' it said, with a picture of a car, *'and live! Pollute inwardly...'* and there was a picture of a packet of cigarettes, *'and live!'*

I went back to the lounge with Zeus.

"You were lucky there, actually," said Zeus, "That was just a local report, and they didn't have all the facts. The larger newspapers are exploding the story – sparked off by a front page article in Miranda's newspaper."

"What?"

"After the dolphin incident, her boss finally gave in. I'm afraid she's revealed everything."

"Oh no!"

"She hasn't made you sound bad... but some of the other papers have exaggerated it all. There's someone else at the door." I went to the window again. I saw that it was a man I didn't know, holding a newspaper.

"I'll handle it," said Zeus, and after a wave of his hand, the man vanished.

"What did you do with him?" I said.

"I sent him home and erased his memory of ever coming here."

"Well done."

At work, I received more recognition from the story exploded by the media. I was inundated with funny stares from all over the

office as I walked through to the staircase. Sean, Susan, Fred and numerous workers that I didn't know were catapulting wide eyes and secret whispers on me. The worst was from John Eaves, Lee, and the man John had been talking to last coffee break, whose name I did not know.

"Jack," said Zeus.

And Jack.

"Why?" I thought, directing my thoughts at Zeus.

"Because..." Zeus began (I, meanwhile, was unconsciously entering an invoice for fake bunny ears in the database), "because a few people have caught you doing peculiar things. Sean caught you writing funny messages in a text file; Lee had funny responses from you; Miranda has seen all the 'weird' things she has; and even Victor has played a part, after you told him about me near the beginning..."

"There's a bit of a draught," said John from across the way, "isn't there?"

"Yes," I mumbled, and John shot him another curious glance.

"...so John, Victor and Jack – in collaboration with Miranda - have put the story together, after Miranda's boss finally agreed."

"But," I thought, 'the articles are only speculation aren't they?'

"No, there's more. The story goes that you, as advisor to the chancellor, increased spending money on extraterrestrial and other unexplained events so that you could get in contact with... well, aliens or something. You are now in cahoots with a powerful godlike being – i.e. me, which is what Victor has contributed. Using these powers, including the time travel incident that Miranda has revealed, you have been sending people mad and causing all sorts of chaos, culminating in this 'Miami miracle'."

My muscles had tensed up now, though I knew there was no reason for them to be. Why not wallow in the recognition of being a miracle-maker? Why not have fun with it?

"Precisely," said Zeus, "That's the attitude. So what if every national newspaper is obsessing over it (and a few international ones, as well as quite a number of blogs and Internet news sites)? Except the Guardian, of course, which wrote 'Proud Man Sings Miami Lyricals' due to a breakdown in communication. They meant to say 'Stroud Man Sees Miami Miracles' of course..."

'So Victor – one of my only good friends – has dropped me in

this, and got together with these scheming people?' I was in a rage – a confusion of all emotions. Victor had been one of my only friends... and now he had betrayed him. For greed. But then, had not I neglected him for so long because of Zeus's intervention? Was I not also greedy?

"Don't put yourself down. Get back to that attitude – you must thrive in your power. What are you doing sitting here entering things into databases? Victor has recounted your story about me. Miranda has told of herds of wild animals in the living room, ski lifts bursting through the ceiling, beverage metamorphosis, people vanishing... and Lee has told of the curious case of the disappearing hot chocolate. So what? These are things that make you different, unique, that stand you out from this world of social conformance. And the gas man too – he played a part."

"The gas man?" I repeated.

"I'm John," said John, startled. I sighed and cursed myself for being so careless. "Are you all right, Oberon?" John was speaking unnaturally.

"I'm fine thanks," I said, "There's a record here that says it's to the gas man. Stupid thing."

'So why,' I thought to Zeus, 'didn't you tell me before? Why didn't you tell me that they were planning this? Why didn't you stop it?'

"It's a laugh isn't it?" said Zeus playfully. I thought about it for a moment. Then, I'm afraid to say, I went a bit hysterical. I burst out laughing.

"Yes," I said, "It's hilarious!"

"The gas man?" said John.

"Yes!" I said, standing up, "The gas man is hilarious. He has an upside-down moustache and only speaks in Morse code. Imagine having a conversation in Morse code!"

John looked at me as if to say: 'You need help'.

'Make his PC explode,' I thought to Zeus.

"With pleasure," said Zeus craftily, and flicked his wrist at the computer John was sat at. It started smoking. John jumped out of his seat and whimpered. Then, the multi-billionaire CEO, the man that owned a third of the world's creativity, incidentally, and has bought out almost half of all the world's patented inventions, appeared on the screen:

"I'm sorry," he said calmly, "but a fault was detected in your system. Please run for your life."

The computer exploded, showering John in broken glass, and sending sparks and mangled metal and plastic all over the room. Several others had come rushing to the scene to see what had happened. Zeus and I, in all of the commotion, managed to escape.

"That was brilliant," I said, as we ran down the stairs. I was greeted by Muriel on the ground floor, who us in our tracks.

"Hey Oberon," she said, and then flashed a copy of the Sun in my face. The front page headline read: 'God Returns in all his Glory' with a close-up picture of me outside my home. How they had got that, I didn't know, and didn't care. "Have you read this?" said Muriel.

"Oh yes," I said confidently, "Thrice."

"Is it true?"

"Oh yes," I repeated. Muriel's face turned from curious to the stunned dead. Her eyes had widened, and her mouth dropped open. She was quivering, and took a few tiny cautious steps backwards. Then, she took a deep breath, and in the most excruciatingly loud and embarrassingly penetrating voice, she yelled:

"He's God!"

There was a pause. Everyone turned from their computers to look at what was happening. I really couldn't say how they'd react. I couldn't imagine what would happen next. Zeus already knew, and was smiling. Then, I decided, what the hell? I'll play along:

"The articles are true," I told the gaping accountants, "I'm God. Get your autograph here!"

"That's the spirit," said the real god.

"Take us away, Zeus," I said, and he made us both vanish in front of the entire office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Hello?" I called, "Hello?"

I was standing next to the lake on Frego. The giant egg-like structure was back in its place. I simply had to find Galatea – there wasn't much time, after all. I walked over to the yellowish tube and looked down into it. There was nothing to see. I proceeded a walk around the outskirts of the lake, darting in and out of the forest as I walked in case I might see her there. If this was where she worked, perhaps I should swim over and knock?

The prospect was quickly invalidated when I heard a noise above my head. At first I saw what looked like a brown hat flying through the sky, but then I noticed the platform, with the chair, floating in the air above me; driving it was Galatea.

"Hello!" I called up. She looked around her, and then into the sky. "Down here!" She looked down to my level, and noticed me, waving.

"Hi again," she called, "Did you want to come up?"

"Yes please!"

She pulled a lever, and the platform shot down to ground level.

"Quickly," she said, and I hopped aboard. She moved the platform back into the skies immediately, making me feel somewhat queasy. "Do you need to do another interrogation?" she said.

"Desperately," I replied. I already had the next person in my mind; I only hoped he would be able to help. Galatea pressed something, causing the mechanical noises to start up again. The building was lifted out of the lake and came up to meet us.

"Thank you for showing me this," I said, "It has been an enormous help. I managed to get a wealth of information from talking to that boy and the other lady."

"That's all right. Now, you know what to do," she said, handing me the headset. I got started right away. Sitting on the seat, I mounted the headset on my head, pushed in the electrodes and began to visualise the man who was next on the Conterrogator's agenda. He was slim, tall, almost bald and had large, almost puffy hands. It took a little longer than last time, but the the waterfall was soon spinning around. I removed the headset and watched that fantastic display again where the building turned itself upside-down, suspended gravity and then let go of the wall of water triumphantly.

Galatea was on the ball. She steered the platform towards the underside of the building, and we stopped in the middle of the pool of water.

Gasping for air, a human leapt out of the water and began screaming. Galatea went to help. She pulled the hysterical person from the pool and asked her if she was all right, with no response (wrong language, of course). I was taken aback. Instead of my target, here was a girl with shoulder-length black hair, immensely pale skin, and a heavily... decorative young figure.

"Well that's new," said Galatea, "I'll have to get a bug report together."

I whipped out the Translator Device, ascertained the correct tongue, and then produced the Conterrogator. She appeared to have calmed down, and Galatea had steered her to the seat on the platform. On the Conterrogator's screen I invoked the digital portrait of the man I sought; I showed it to the girl.

"Do you know this man?" I asked.

"That's my father," she choked, still in quite a state. "Where am I? What is this place?"

"It's OK," said Galatea soothingly, "It's safe." I recognised that her empathy with this race was much more developed than our own.

"He's a politician is he not?" I said.

"My dad? Yeah."

"Then I wonder if you could help me."

Suddenly she perked up.

"Help you?" she repeated. "And what will I get?"

I looked to Galatea. She didn't seem to understand either.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"What will *I* get out of it if I help you? If it isn't money I can't do it."

"Money?" I whispered, turning to Galatea.

"Yes, you know," she answered, "Ah! My brother has a collection. I'm sure he won't mind if I need some. What's your name," she said, turning to the girl.

"Why should I tell you?"

"OK," said Galatea calmly, "I'm going to need that seat now. I have to get the money. May I?"

The girl stood up. I think she was still a bit frightened. She

stepped off the platform (the water was not deep; we were merely wading in it), and Galatea took control of it. She pulled back a lever or two, and it hovered upwards for a second.

"Will you stay here?" she asked, "Or would you like to come down?"

"Going down," I said, "might be too much of a shock."

Galatea steered herself off the building and disappeared from view as she descended. The girl screamed again, and moved rapidly away from me.

"What *is* this freaky place? Is this some sort of theme park?"

"It's OK," I said.

"Oh no. I'm in one of those sci-fi novels aren't I?"

"Please," I said, trying to copy Galatea's style, "If you stay calm, perhaps we can help each other. Now, I would like to ask you..."

"No info before I get the money, thank you! I know your type!"

I was stunned for a moment. I had never before encountered a *demand* for something – especially something as abstract as this concept of *money* – in exchange for *knowledge*. It was almost heretic. At the time, I'm sure I was just going with the 'flow', so to speak, not really understanding what she was really saying, or resolving to believe that she herself did not understand what she was saying. So I just said, "Galatea will be back soon," and so ensued a period of awkward silence.

Indeed, Galatea did return. She landed right next to me, and I saw that she was carrying a small opaque tub in her arms. She stepped forward once. The girl took two steps towards us.

"Now," said Galatea, opening the tub, "I don't know much about this." She fumbled around inside it for a while. "Does 'yen' mean anything to you?"

"Japan!" shouted the girl, "I knew it!"

"You are connected to the J'nanator network are you not?" I said to Galatea. She nodded, and I quickly put 'Japan' into a query.

"Nippon," I read out carefully, "An island region on the planet Earth, on the western edge of the so-called Pacific Ocean. Are you from there?"

"No!"

"Lira?" Galatea continued, "Renminbi Yuan? Euro?"

"Euro," said the girl, "What have you got?"

"There's only one, I'm afraid." Galatea took out a small slip of paper and showed it to the girl.

"Five-hundred," she said, snatching it, "That'll buy you a few minutes. So wha' do ya wan'a know?"

This time, my questions were different.

CHAPTER THIRTY

"Did I do the right thing?"

"Absolutely!" Zeus assured me, "Of course! Of course you did the right thing. You're having fun, as am I. So... now what do you propose to do, God? Or do you prefer to be called Allah?"

"Very funny. I need to warn people about the war," I said with determination in my voice. Zeus looked at me without a smile, and sighed.

"You're too late. As we speak, armies are forging together. Satellite missiles are being calibrated, with new nuclear weapons being sent to them for deployment. You are too late."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had blown my opportunity of saving the planet from nuclear disaster. I sat down on the sofa and put my hand up to my mouth. There were no more chances. There was nothing left I could do but sit, and watch, and wait.

"Don't forget," said Zeus, "you are God."

Then I had a thought.

"You can see the future can't you Zeus?" I said, "What happens to the Earth?"

"It's the same as what happened to it in the parallel universe I showed you. The nuclear war. And then some other things."

"But in a parallel universe somewhere," I said, concentrating hard so that I got it right, "the war doesn't happen. And there's nothing I can do to stop it in this universe is there?"

"Technically correct, yes."

"So should we just go to a parallel universe then?"

"I have a better idea," said Zeus.

"Yes?" I said.

"We go to Zirth."

Why hadn't I thought of it before? Zirth - the Utopia - a society that seemed to make society work the way it should: no war, no violence, no litter, no ignorance, no pollution... There was a plentiful supply of energy, and a plentiful supply of space... things I could never have even dreamt of before. Their technology worked – it was efficient and innovative, audacious and harmonious, and they were the most intelligent beings I had ever come across in a civilisation.

Furthermore, I didn't need to be looking at them in whatever their alien form might be. Thanks to the Corfizz Perception Engine, I viewed them just as if they were ordinary humans – although, I don't think they would really be described as 'ordinary' humans at all.

There was no crime on Zirth. People could leave their cars or their 'hyperspace stations' (the devices that created wormholes) wherever they wanted – no locks or security features needed. There was no word in the Zirthiran language for violence, so, apparently, when some violent civilisations were discovered in the universe (like Earth), it was called something like 'destructive being-to-being infliction' or 'counter-productive mal-rectitude'.

"We need to get you a J'nanator," said Zeus, steering us into a little place on the side of the street. It was more or less an empty room – white, except for a soft blue carpet. A man was inside.

"Ah," he said, looking at us with a smile, "J'nanator isn't it?"

"How did you know?" I replied.

"It's obvious when I can't connect to you. If you'd care to step into the middle of the room."

I did so, following his hand gestures for guidance to the exact spot.

"Now this won't hurt a bit," he said, and immediately afterwards, my vision went black, and I started to see huge bluey grey clouds in front of me, exploding and pulsating in an orchestra of surrealistic noises. Electric bolts of light struck through the inky blue backdrop, tore apart my perception, and deafened me bangs and crashes and puffs of red and purple smoke that smelt like burning wood and tasted like a herbal extract, the kind you find in skin creams.

Then came the text, overlaid on the continual volcanic-esque activity:

'First language detected: English, Earth. If this is not your preferred language please attempt to stamp your left foot.'

There was a pause.

'The Corfizz J'nanator process must now begin copying your knowledge and personality traits to your personal device. The following information sources have been detected:

'Cerebral cortex,

'Cerebellum,

'Which is normal for a being of type: human, *Homo Sapiens*,

Earth.

'The Corfizz J'nanator procedure must at this point remind you that this process has never before been tested on this species. Please do not panic as your sensory stimuli are removed; however, you may experience a dream-like state in which memories being copied are replayed, experienced or subverted. Please also be aware that you may experience memories of events that haven't happened to you yet. This is perfectly normal.

'The process will begin in eleven Earth seconds.'

Eleven Earth seconds passed, and there, emerging from the scarlet smoke, came a vision of myself. Looking like a computer-rendered 3D model in a wireframe arena, the figure was rotated and rolled in different directions. Then the arena, a neon green grid, morphed roughly into an open cuboid shape, and that's when I blacked out.

Blue tunnels binding silver portals shot forth at me, and out of each came a memory. Looking over the Seine from a restaurant table. Flash. Craning to look over heads in a precinct. Zoom. A dolphin soaring over a tsunami. Zap. Sitting at a desk writing reports. Snap. A lady gaping at a herd of creatures in a lounge. Swoosh. A mysterious package arriving at the door. Boom. A room of students shouting at each other. Flash. Two people vanishing through a wall. Flash. Hunks of twisted metal flying into space. Flash. A sharp pain on the back of my neck. Flash. An explosion in the street. Flash. A bird on a lamppost. Flash. A map on a wall. Flash. A computer screen. Flash. A startled face. Flash. A detective. Flash. A postman. Flash. A doctor. Flash. Pink bench. Flash. Paper. Flash. Palace. Flash. Mother. Flash. Book. Flash. Light. Flash. Rain. Flash. Flash.

Just rings of light – passing through rings of light endlessly: a flash, a flash, a flash.

It slowed.

I looked around. A light got dimmer. A wheel turned. Shadows retreated, revealing a metal lid, opening on to reality with a satisfying creak. A few hydraulic pieces rotated, clunked and turned, and in a pattern of interlocking polygons that broke apart, the doors collapsed onto the real world.

A face was looking at me. A friendly, concerned face.

"Feeling OK?" A note of experience shone through the gentle,

grey eyes. I found my mouth.

"Yes," I said, aware of whispering. I was in the room.

"Your J'nanator," said the man, nodding to a point on my right. I looked around to discover those jagged patterns forming a barrier three-quarters of a circle around me. On a small platform just to my right was the object to which the man was referring – my personal J'nanator, held, apparently, in a small, blue-rimmed hole, rotating in a slow, tempting, triumphant but almost ominous way. When I went to take it, I found that it was not clamped there, but rather floating in the middle of it, and the blue rim looked more like an electromagnetic force field than a mere decoration. I looked to the man for confirmation. He nodded slightly, and I took hold of the device, a white, curved little gadget, straddling the gap between a PDA, a GPS receiver and a mobile 'phone, but was marked from each in its touch: it wasn't a dull plastic-y feeling as I expected, but a soft, spongy material that moulded around my hands, and then stayed as it was.

"It is moulded for you alone," said the man, "And that concludes the process."

"Thank you very much," I said.

"And now," he said, "the rest of Zirth awaits." He smiled, and gestured to the open glass door to the street outside. "Enjoy."

I looked from the man to the door, and then to Zeus, who had been waiting behind me for some time. He came to stand beside me, and we walked out of the 'shop' together.

"Oh, did I have to pay anything for this?" I said, just as we got outside.

"There's no money here," Zeus answered.

"No money? So... there's no... what?"

"It's a shame the concept of doing something simply because it benefits other people, like that man providing a J'nanator induction service, seems so alien to you. The Zirthiran mind works with the knowledge that it is just one component of a much greater community, as though the whole civilisation is just one organism. As I've alluded to before, just as a computer network becomes stronger and more powerful as more nodes are added to it, so the power and ability of the Zirthiran community grows stronger when new members are working in unison. You are now a part of their network."

A kind of tingling made its way up my back as he said this,

partly of uncertainty, partly of excitement.

"That process you just went through," he said, "put all of your knowledge onto *that*." He pointed down at the device I was still grasping solidly. "Every Zirthiran you see before you," and he waved his arm out to the myriad citizens that passed us by, "has unlimited access to your knowledge, even as it grows."

"But what about privacy?" I said, aghast.

"Knowledge is free on Zirth. As is creativity and invention. Free, not as in money, because there is no money to speak of, but free as in *libre* – the freedom to go wherever it can go. Just as your knowledge is available to everyone here, so their combined knowledge is available to you, just like a huge, constantly updating, worldwide, free, internet. Go on – find something out."

"How?"

"Well, what would you like to find?"

"Erm, well, I supposed I'd... I'd like to see a map – yes, a map of the planet Zirth," I said, growing in confidence as I thought of something. I looked from Zeus to my J'nanator, and as I stared at its blank screen, I felt the blackness swirl, just slightly, just as though a key were subtly unlocking a door.

The swirl had unlocked the J'nanator, and suddenly, I was being sucked inside it.

I fell, or was rather tugged down by an invisible force, onto a spinning circular platform, as great towering structures opened out around me. Metallic beams and totems, criss-crossing to hold up a vast white wall, were spinning and gyrating just centimetres away from the platform, getting further away as the walls pulled back. I grimaced every time one of them lunged at me, each accompanied by an echoing squeal, each like a wand being waved at me. As they got further away, I noticed that the platform was raising, with tranquil indifference to the activity going on around it. The girder-like structure's now seemed more like conductor's hands, as they began tracing out blue streaks of light, brief orange effulgences and electrifying white scars through the inky space between. The platform was still getting higher, and I noticed that at certain points along the blue streaks being created by the girders, glowing white globules seemed to be hovering, suspended in the air, as the blue haze from which they had originated just faded away in the background.

More and more globules formed, and the beams got faster and faster in their conducting of the sphere formation. Noises like those from power generators were almost deafening, and, just when I thought I was safe, at this distance from the tumult, the platform ceased its serene ascension with a sickening halt. I looked to my feet. The platform was getting smaller! And there was an odd, numbing sensation I felt at my feet too...

I soon realised that the platform was not diminishing in size at all – it was moving away from me! It had brought me up here, and was now descending, leaving me floating helplessly with this ceaseless dynamic pyrotechnic display of energy on all sides... Crackling and swooshing sounds continued as the beams swiped the air, leaving this unusual pattern of ever growing floating globules in their wake.

But then, strangely, it stopped again. Only this time, everything stopped. The beams and globules hung in mid-air. There was silence for just a second. Then the platform began spinning again, picking up speed rapidly, and emitting a low hum, a bit like a chain in a pulley system. It stopped, and with a high-pitched screech, a little rim around the edge snapped open. It detached completely from the platform, and floated upwards, passing around me and then higher up still. I looked up to see it stop a metre or two above my head, like the waist belt of a minor giant, set against the infinite black sky, ceiling or whatever it was. Meanwhile, the circular platform whisked itself away, disappearing from view quickly.

One of the wands fell down so sharply that I thought I was to be hammered back onto the platform, but it stopped just short of my hair with a clang that rang through my ears from end to end. The beam then began to trace out a final, greyish, almost silky ribbon of light, or at least, illuminated dust, right around the interior of this place, before retracting into a distant gloomy tunnel. An array of spotlights shone up from the bottom of the vast arena, seemingly pointing at my feet. I looked around at the huge network of globules that extended to eternity beyond the new 'ribbon' that I had seen 'painted' around me. With another echoing hydraulic click, rays of light suddenly began protruding from each globule, coming out to meet with their neighbouring spheres. The protrusions got faster and faster, until after a minute or two – I can't tell how long – it seemed as though every globule was connected to every other, and there was a reddish haze on

the horizon where they just kept going on infinitely.

Like a television screen flickering into life, a message appeared in large lettering on the ribbon (although it was still slightly semi-transparent).

"Hello," came a confident female voice, echoing around me as though coming from every direction – it made me jump so much that I turned full circle, and in so doing, I found that every view at every degree was identical to every other: the same message on the 'screen', and the same infinite globule network. The messages were subtitling what I was hearing. "This is the first time you have used the Corfizz J'nanator Knowledge Acquisition Service. This tour will demonstrate the features of your J'nanator so that you may become accustomed to it. You will notice that to your left, your right, and every other direction, there are no exits. To finish your session with your tour, you will need to jump up to the circular belt above you, and tug it down."

I looked up. I could never reach that!

"You may notice that you cannot reach the belt. This is not a problem. Please attempt to jump up to it now, and you will see for yourself..."

The voice stopped; the subtitling remained on the screen. I looked up to the belt again, and, aware of frowning, and decided to humour the system. I bent my knees and jumped in the air, stretching my arm out for the belt. To my surprise – or rather, my horror, or my paralysing fright – I found I was floating upwards, straight towards my goal, so that I could neatly take hold of the belt. It was as though I was space-walking! The peculiar sensation continued as I just hung there, above the infinite cavern below and above me, seemingly to have come from nowhere, and to have nowhere to go... I sweat a little, I'm sure I did, and in my fright, I let go. It was with an almost calming grace that I descended back down to where I originally was.

"Very good," said the voice, "The first thing for you to try is finding a specific item of knowledge, or, as we say, a j'nanum, singular of j'nana. Simply start speaking – your words will be interpreted in the best way they can, and all relevant resources will be fetched from the network, and presented in a holographic form in a ring around you. Try that now."

Even though the process had been explained, and I could more or less picture something of what it might be like, I don't think

anything could have reasonably prepared me for what happened next, when I took the woman's advice and tried that now. I was going to ask for a map, as I had said to Zeus.

"I'd like..." I began, hesitating. But it was in this period of hesitation that the Corfizz J'nanator Knowledge Acquisition Service made its search of the network, and with lightning speed, bursts of light, like frogs being inescapably pumped through a hose, came fleeting down the rays that connected the globules – the nodes – until they reached the screen, at which they offloaded their 'frog'. Little graphic icons inflated in size, depicting search results for the phrase 'I'd like'. This all happened in less than two seconds, and the icons were now very slowly rotating, and the whole ensemble was also rotating in a ring around me, as if worshipping me, at a congregation. The search results included *I'd like a coffee*, a novel by a certain Roman Clemence; 'I'd like to inform you of a most serious incident...' the beginning of a letter addressed to an open policy organisation, concerning coffee machines; *I'd like to see that for myself*, a feature film starring a certain Norman Hendelbrass; *I'd like a coffee*, a film adaptation of the novel by Roman Clemence; and so on.

Trying to contain my innate, agape feelings of astonishment, I continued the request to the network:

"I'd like a map." I was unsure whether I should say 'please'. The previous search results had vanished in a kind of Hollywood transition already, and I quickly managed to add "Of Zirth," to be as precise as possible. New light was being pumped around the globules. Instead of a range of search results ringing me, however, one particular icon came right up to where I was standing – I mean, floating – taking up nearly half the chamber, and the rest of the icons, much smaller than the massive map now in front of me, lined themselves up in rows in the remaining space.

It had taken a fraction of a second, this time, for me to find myself face to face with the exact answer to my query – with a map of the planet Zirth. I stood to regard it for a few moments. It was certainly a slightly larger planet than Earth. I tried unconsciously to find patterns or similarities, and I thought I found some, but it was probably my imagination – this was an alien world.

I decided I would do some more tests with this machine later, so I floated up to the 'belt', and pulled it down. Not having let go quick

enough, I was still holding on to it when it plummeted downwards, stopped abruptly, and was then met with the circular platform which had reappeared. I climbed aboard the platform and the belt snapped back onto its rim. The platform rotated slowly, and, accompanied by some more mechanical noises, it ascended higher and higher, until I found myself blinded by an ever growing source of light. I blinked, and when I looked next, I was back on Zirth, standing next to Zeus.

"Is that what happens every time you use it?" I asked.

"No, no," he said, "That's just the guided tour. You did not finish it then?"

"No – should I have? It was rather dizzying."

"Well, there's plenty of time, I suppose."

Zeus and I were walking in the crowded street on Zirth, when he stopped me to point out a shop window. It was a kind of futuristic hardware store – a building shorter than most, but still huge, shaped roughly like a quill elongated at the waist, and white in colour.

"Let me present the perfect accompaniment to a J'nanator..." said Zeus.

I took a step forward to inspect closer the product Zeus was indicating: the 'Brain Box'. We talked. The Brain Box allowed you to use a computer to perform advanced features on your neurological assets. You could browse through your memories, your knowledge and even sometimes your dreams, just as though they were files on an external hard drive, and you could edit them or save them or just back them up for safe keeping. Some models of this device allowed further control of other bodily systems, such as the one giving access to the digestive system, which allowed you to view and re-prioritise the food stuffs being processed in certain parts of the digestive procedure. Remote doctors could alleviate common digestive ailments this way as well.

Apparently, these systems were produced using an advanced form of 'quantum attotechnology': a cross between quantum computing and nanotechnology, but thousands of times smaller. These quantum 'attobots', though admittedly I don't understand most of it, were linked up to the same network as the J'nanators were in macroscopic life, but their concern was with a central database of viruses and other afflictions. The network was faster than the standard bodily defences and could therefore protect against new infections

much quicker.

"A shining example of the strength of the community at large benefiting every individual," as Zeus put it.

The Brain Box could also use these invisible robots to put you to sleep (at your own will), or even render yourself unconscious with different levels of awareness. Certain parts of the brain could also be shut off individually, allowing some common emotions to be effectively 'disabled'. I'm told it won't work with my own feeble cranium.

"Do you know what a popular sport is on Zirth?" said Zeus, as we walked through the street.

"No," I murmured.

"Particle accelerating," he said. "They put a massive particle accelerator in a stadium and people pay to watch and get excited over the creation of the largest wormhole, or the fastest speeds possible, or the formation of quark-gluon plasma."

"Interesting," I said. "You know, I really think this place is a utopia, isn't it?"

"Not yet," said Zeus cryptically. "Not yet."

We continued our stroll down the pedestrianised streets, browsing through the shops.

Yes, I felt safe here. I felt as though invincible, protected by this huge network I had entered. The Zirthirans would smile and greet us politely as they walked, and they would be looking around them in all directions, gathering every slither of knowledge that came their way. I don't know exactly when it hit me, but it seemed nobody was old around here, let alone anybody diseased or dying.

"I think we should get a hyperspace station," said Zeus, walking casually in to a hyperspace supply store. I followed, and inside, I looked all around me. The shop had walls painted bright white, and the floor was polished and gleaming. There were stands all around the room that were holding hyperspace stations: large metallic cuboids with an angled control panel on the top of them. They came in a variety of colours, but did not look particularly special, looking, as they did, a bit like fold-up electric treadmills.

"Hello," said another man who was browsing next to me.

"Hello," I replied softly.

"Are you looking for your first hyperspace station?" asked the

man, "You look a little puzzled."

"Yes," I answered, trying to be as cheerful, "I am."

"I have one like this," he said, indicating a purple hyperspace station. "It's a CQFE with customisable size and shapes settings."

"What's a CQFE?" I asked, hoping it wasn't a silly question. The man didn't mind at all.

"Corfizz Quantum Foam Extractor," explained the alien, "It takes wormholes from the quantum foam. Oh, I must go now." The man turned around to be faced with a woman carrying a plastic carrier bag. "Have you got it, dear?" he said.

"Yes," replied the woman, smiling profusely. The man waved and they left the shop.

"What type of model would you like, sir?" the shop assistant asked Zeus. I wandered over to where Zeus was standing, at the opposite end of the shop with the grinning salesman.

"Which do you have?" Zeus inquired.

"Everything," said the salesman, "We have rotating CMBH models, we have CS-TPs, we have CQFEs, CPUEs and CWHSEs too. Which do you prefer?"

"Could you explain, for the benefit of my associate here, what the benefits of each are?"

"Certainly sir," said the salesman and he turned to face me. I listened intently (and yes, I admit, I don't understand all of what he said... well, most of it). "Let's start with the first one. The Corfizz Mini-Black Hole models construct two nanoscopic black holes in an empty parallel universe. It then twists the black hole tunnels together so that you have a linked wormhole with two mouths. Now, you can get two versions of these: the tachyon models make the black holes out of tachyons which means you can move them faster than the speed of light and therefore create the space-time-probability discrepancy that you need; then there's the gravity version that puts one of the mouths in a spinning black hole torus. Now, the tachyon models are slightly easier to make but they do have the added danger of transporting you to a different period in time as well as space."

(OK – so I only understood parts of it...)

"What's next? Yes, the Corfizz Space-Time Penetrators are the easiest models to manufacture because it is the easiest method of wormhole production but isn't always reliable. This model uses masses

and masses of antimatter energy to punch a hole in the fabric of space-time, and that, is, in essence, what a wormhole is.

"Then there's the Corfizz Quantum Foam Extractors. These are very complex and have the smallest power consumption. They were the first model ever to be built. They take the wormholes from the sub-atomic quantum fluctuations that already exist within quantum foam. You see, all you have to do is create a tiny vacuum chamber that generates enough negative energy. You can get versions of this one that generate the negative energy through a mains supply of antimatter energy, and you can get the ones with rotating mirrors that reflect laser beams, the latter being more costly in labour, of course."

(...small parts of it...)

"Corfizz Parallel Universe Extractors are probably the simplest design, which makes them the smallest, lightest and most easily transportable. They are a bit of a cheating system because they use wormholes that have been generated through other methods to steal wormhole mouths from parallel universes where wormholes are abundant.

"Corfizz White Hole-Smith Extractors are quite similar to the CPUEs because they take wormholes from white holes when they're spewed out. However, they take a very long time to load because finding a white hole that spews wormhole mouths is rather tricky nowadays. These models aren't really recommended, and they are known to spew out other matter as well. I remember once when we tested a CWHSE, we got a load of iaos in the face. Ha ha!"

"Ha," I said, considering it appropriate to pretend he understood. "So, Zeus, which one do we need?"

"I think," said Zeus to the salesman, "we'll just take a regular CQFE, thanks."

"OK."

"Thank you very much for your explanation," I said. The shopkeeper smiled, and Zeus and I were soon leaving the shop together with a hyper-surrealistic device, packaged in a large white box on rollers. We continued walking down the streets. "So what part of Zirth are we in?"

"It's a place called Titeron," said Zeus, "In the northern hemisphere. We're near the city of Sligdon."

"Oh right," I said.

"Ah!" Zeus stopped in his tracks and looked towards a hardware store. "In there! That's my old 9-D mate, Apollo!"

"How can you see him from here?"

"What sort of a question is that?" said Zeus, "Stay here, Oberon." Zeus went into the shop alone, taking his purchase – I mean, acquisition – with him, and leaving me to stand and receive smiles from all of the alien passers-by. It was a... strange experience, so of course I never expected to see a familiar face pop into my vision.

It was the face of Clive Nelson, who was walking and talking with another man that I didn't recognise, one taller than Clive and wearing extremely tidy attire, with straight black hair to match, quite pale skin, but a marked aura of dignity.

"Hello there - don't I know you?" asked Clive when he was near enough. Both Clive and the man he was with were taller than me, making me feel slightly small and insignificant, but their friendliness made up for it.

"Yes," I said, "You're Clive Nelson aren't you? I'm Oberon Furrow. We met on Earth."

The other man took a distinct step backward.

"No it's all right Isaac," Clive said to him, "Oberon's a good fellow."

"Why?" I said, "What's wrong with Earth?"

"Your home planet," explained Isaac, "incurs instinctive responses in our race, in view of the consistent, belligerent and hostile history, and indeed attitude, of your people."

"Yes, I see," I said, thinking of nothing else to say but "I am sorry."

"It isn't your fault," said Clive.

"So why hasn't Zirth made contact with us and... traded information, and technology?"

"For precisely the same reasons," said Isaac, "We are afraid of the sensitivity of your belligerence. The network would surely be damaged by ones so..."

"Ignorant?" I suggested.

"Completely inverted," he said, agreeing nonetheless with my comment, "when set against our own values and principles. A war-like race..."

"We don't always have wars!" I protested.

"Don't you?" said Clive, "Don't think we haven't looked through your history books. Every page of your history is inebriated in suffering, slavery and cruelty. Don't think we've not analysed your political systems. Your hundred-and-ninety-three-or-so divisions of society are either exploitative, oppressive or in a state of dire poverty. Not *one* of the other twelve intelligent life-bearing planets in this universe have any part of their inhabitants in a state of poverty as serious as Earth's – even those that believe violence is a viable course of action..."

"Keep your voice down," Isaac muttered, and Clive reduced his tone to a whisper.

"...when faced with the need for defence – not even they toss aside the potential of a life, nor deny opportunities for all of their inhabitants to be as great as any other."

I felt ashamed. I could no longer defend my people.

"But as we say," said Isaac, "It isn't your fault."

"So I can now spread the news can't I?" I said. Clive and Isaac looked at each other, seemingly having cottoned on to my meaning straight away.

"No!" Clive objected.

"We have regarded your items of media used for entertainment purposes on primitive mass-produced machinery, indicating to us the attitude taken to exoplanetary terrestrial intelligence, such as ourselves, fomenting defensive anxiety." Isaac nodded knowledgeably. I lowered my eyebrows, and when Clive noticed my confusion he said:

"He means you've made films about war with aliens."

Isaac flinched.

"Oh I see. Well," I sighed a bit, or tried to laugh, but couldn't quite, "That's all they are isn't it? *Films*. And I'm sure it wouldn't come to that even so..." and I tried to make myself believe it, but somehow, my conscience felt as though I had been lying.

"Would you care for a drink back at my house?" Clive offered. I looked towards the shop that Zeus was inside. I hesitated. I had a curiosity for the planet Zirth, and took a view in which I thought: the more I could get used to it, the better, because it was – without a doubt – so much better than where I came from, and – although this was just a fleeting subconscious thought in the back of my mind – might well be my home in time to come.

"Yes please," I answered. Clive smiled again, and Isaac produced a remote control-type device from his inside jacket pocket. He pressed a button, and a wormhole - a circular disc suspended in the space-time in front of us - appeared. Isaac removed his hyperspace station from through the wormhole, and then the wormhole vanished, by gradually getting smaller and smaller until it had no radius at all. Isaac pressed a few buttons in quick succession on the control panel of his hyperspace station. He then pulled a lever, and another wormhole appeared.

It led to a house: a large detached property of an indeterminable material painted a brick red colour. There were three floors, and a very pleasant front garden with all manner of exotic plant matter that I had never seen before. The plants were by no means green - most of them were multi-coloured, and some of them were changing colour with time; some of them were moving too, giving the whole area a very 'alive', vivid, feel to it. As with all wormholes, there was a slight warp around the edge of the disc.

"After you, Isaac," said Clive, politely.

Isaac stepped through the wormhole, after thanking his friend (as I had of course deemed them to be friends, though wasn't everyone on this planet a friend of everyone else?). I was last to step through. I looked at the hardware store for the final time, and entered cautiously.

"I suppose you've never used a wormhole before, have you?" said Clive. I looked back at it. From this end, I could see through to the shopping street from which we had emerged. After a few more seconds, the disc shrank to nothing.

We walked up the pathway that ran through the exotic front garden. I regarded the richness of the plants with amazement. The leaves were all sorts of shapes and sizes; some had a depth to them, with veins drawing out intricate patterns; some with wavy tentacles drawn out of them, reaching up to tree branches.

"Welcome back Clive," came a voice of which I could not detect the source. It was a male, artificial-sounding voice with computer-like overtones.

"Thanks Max," said Clive. The door swung open by itself, and we stepped inside. The hallway had a floor that was tiled with interesting geometric patterns, and the walls were a light cream colour. There was a wormhole immediately to the left, leading to another

homely corridor.

"That goes upstairs, of course," Clive explained to me, seeing me staring at it.

We filed into the room on the first right. It had a royal red carpet, and three of the walls were wallpapered in white, whilst the final one was a pale magenta colour with a fireplace in it. There was a three-piece blue leather suite in the room too.

"This is all very similar to a home on Earth," I remarked.

"What's wrong with that?" said Clive. At that moment, Cadence walked into the room. She was smiling as usual.

"Hello everyone," she said, "You're from Earth!" she then exclaimed, pointing at me vaguely, with one hand covering her mouth.

"Yes," I said. Cadence looked a little wary. Her smile had gone and her eyes were wide open. She took a step back, as though about to faint.

"It's all right Cadence," said Clive, supporting her in his arms, "Oberon's a good fellow." Cadence's face returned to normal. We all took a seat in the lounge. There was a coffee table next to the sofa, and I was sitting on one of the chairs in the corner of the room.

"As I was saying," said Clive, "there's nothing unusual about Zirth being so similar to Earth. You see, there are an infinite number of parallel universes, playing out every single possibility, no matter how improbable. This universe just happens to be the one where there are two planets that have similar industrial materials and similar products, etcetera."

"Besides," said Isaac, "you must know of the theories that all intelligent life evolves under similar circumstances?"

"I... er," I hesitated, "I may have heard of it," now feeling that the world I came from wasn't after all very special. I myself felt very insignificant too, not least in comparison with the greatness of these aliens surrounding me. I was spared the awkwardness of Isaac's query by Cadence:

"What would you like to drink?" she asked.

"What do you have?"

"You know of tea and coffee? We have equivalents," explained Clive, "and there's also mellemon juice. The mellemon: a fruit that is a cross between a melon and a lemon."

"I'll have some mellemon juice please." I vaguely remembered

Zeus telling him about it some time before and it sounded rather pleasant.

"OK. Would you like the same, Isaac?" asked Clive.

"Yes please," Isaac answered; Cadence also agreed.

"Four mellemon juices please Max," Clive ordered. The disembodied voice of Max replied:

"Certainly," and a wormhole opened above the coffee table. Four tall glasses of mellemon juice (yellow in colour) were deposited from the wormhole onto the table.

"Thanks Max," said Clive. "Max is our Corfizz Home Computer System," Clive explained as he passed me his drink, "Each Home Computer System has a unique personality just like people, and they evolve too. They start off with limited house-keeping abilities and then their knowledge grows and grows. Max can just about wash the dishes, and he can make drinks and simple meals. He mastered ironing years ago."

"I had better leave soon," said Isaac, with his flawless pronunciation, glancing at his watch. His watch, I noticed, was rectangular. With a quick glance at Clive and Cadence's wrists, he saw that their watches were the same.

"Fine," said Clive. I took a sip of the mellemon juice. Delicious! Not as good as bon-dellee pudding, obviously, but I was getting the impression that Zirthiran cuisine was the best in the universe.

"How far away is Earth from here?" I asked, forgetting the number Zeus had told me before.

"Earth is... around about seven thousand million light years from here." My stomach lurched momentarily; I still couldn't get used to the universe being so much larger than I thought. The realisation was hitting me now - the realisation that I was on another planet, talking to aliens, and that all of these incredible things that I never knew of before existed in the universe. It was simply... mind-boggling, to find a close approximation to a feeling not accounted for in the realms of the English language, and quite understandably too.

"Now Oberon," said Clive, "You must not inform anybody else on Earth about the rest of civilisation yet."

"Why not?"

"We – the community – have decided not to let the secret on to

Earth yet because of... what we've already said. So we do not want to be responsible, you know, if anything happens. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes I understand," I said, "I don't think anyone would listen to me anyway. But I would like to ask something, if I may. Surely it is better not to exclude the humans of Earth from this knowledge, but to try to – well – convert them somehow; purify them, if you like, to make them peaceable?"

"It's risky," said Isaac, though not without thinking about it.

"Ordinarily we would, of course, cherish the opportunity to spread knowledge and technology far and wide – of course we would. But in the end, looking at how you've degenerated more and more over the years, we thought it better this way. Can you imagine people from Earth with hyperspace stations and wormholes and antimatter energy to last them eternity? We shuddered to imagine what evil some of your people could potentially unleash with this power. People set up huge debates, we had conferences, we had protests, from both sides of the argument there seemed benefits and pitfalls, but *please*, understand our position. It is only from a mark of – respect? Sorrow? Pity, even? - that we have kept Earth's status as one of the thirteen havens of 'intelligent' life; most other races in the universe have removed your 'intelligent' tag, if they ever gave it to you in the first place. Of course, you know I mean no personal offence..."

"I know," I said, "I understand. I have first-hand experience, after all, and I've been thinking about it a lot. You're right, of course."

"Thank you."

I suddenly began worrying about the time. And, as if they'd sensed what I was thinking (and I was used to that by now), the three Zirthirans looked at me with sympathy, and Clive said:

"Are you tired? Do you want to go?"

"I think I ought to," I said, "Thank you for the drink." I finished it with another swig and stood up. Cadence got up too and went out of the room, returning shortly with a hyperspace station.

"Thanks, dear, I'll tap in the co-ordinates," said Clive, and Cadence sat down while Clive pressed some buttons speedily. Once done, a wormhole appeared that led back to the streets of Sligdon.

"Thanks again," I said.

"No trouble," said Clive, "we would never miss an opportunity

to expand our horizons with this enlightening chat, of course."

"We want to work with people, not against them," Isaac added, wisely.

"And remember: don't tell your – what do you call it – a government? - well, don't tell them a thing."

"That's fine," I said, "I won't."

"Goodbye," Cadence called.

"Valedictions," said Isaac, as I stepped through the wormhole back to the streets. I was able to wave to Clive as the wormhole got smaller and smaller, and then disappeared completely. I was now faced with a smiling Zeus.

"Having fun?" said Zeus.

"Oh yes," I said, "I met Clive again. He invited me for a drink."

"I know. You had mellemon juice. Great isn't it?"

"Divine. Simply divine. This... this is a divine civilisation."

"Not yet," Zeus muttered again, "not yet."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Back on Earth, I was inundated with telephone calls from people who had read the articles in the papers. People from all over the county, the country, the world, that I didn't know, Christians seeking proof of miracles, people from the press seeking a statement, mediums and cult leaders wanting me present at their séances and most at Yenom Accounting had rung me. It had given me quite an insight into how the minds of politicians work, trying, as I was, to avoid awkward questions. How on Earth did all these people get my number?

Zeus wanted me to enjoy the experience - "most of your kind would revel in the fame" - and so he paced up and down the room listening to what I was saying on the telephone. I was not enjoying it. I do not know why heat overcame my body in waves, why my hands were clammy and why I stammered like a vibrating string. So after I had finished explaining to a man that I simply could not come to his house and resurrect his budgie, I turned to Zeus and sighed, about to explain these feelings.

"I know," Zeus said before I could start, "I know how you feel. So if you don't like it, we'll go somewhere else."

"I certainly don't feel safe around here." I would have wanted to return to Zirth.

We were interrupted by a noise that sounded roughly like a herd of animals stampeding down the road. I rushed to the window. The sight of them made my stomach lurch, jump through my skin, catapult itself into the open air and get itself arrested for indecent exposure, before being tortured in a high security compound in Mexico. It *was* a herd of wild animals, also known as paparazzi, stampeding over my driveway and hammering against my porch like a battering ram. It was a wonder nobody was crushed to death. The doorbell was on constantly.

I pulled the curtains together as inconspicuously as I could, but it was too late. I was spotted. But seemingly, it was by only one person: Miranda, who came to the window, looking flustered. She was mouthing something at me; I could not lip-read but it looked urgent. I was not quite sure what I was doing, when I gestured for her to go around the back, but she seemed to understand, and rushed off, just in time for me to close the curtain before the stampede reached the window.

I retreated to the back of the house, and, seeing Miranda cowering behind a water tank, I pulled the door ajar as slowly and silently as I could. She rushed inside without a sound, and I shut and locked the door behind her.

"You must be magic," she said, "I've never known anyone who could get someone so neatly out of a paparazzi wave."

The story must have been going to her head, however, since I'm sure Zeus had not interfered in that little episode. We walked into the dining room, where I found Zeus holding up a large board bearing the words 'I am invisible'.

Miranda shut the dining room door behind us and I felt just a little bit afraid, or perhaps just nervous.

"We haven't much time," she said, "We must get you away from the press. A room has been booked for you in Hamburg; German reporting on your powers has been so far sedate."

"Hamburg?" I exclaimed, trying to ignore Zeus's playing around with his sign.

"It seemed the safest place to be, for now. Please, you must come with us..."

I looked from her to Zeus and Zeus to her, and had a brainwave. Miranda was heavily out of breath, and waited patiently for my response.

"No," I said, "I think you should come with *us*." I looked back to Zeus, and he understood.

And suddenly we were staring at a sign that read 'Hauptstrasse'. We were in a street, fairly crowded in fact, but people just walked straight past us. Yellowing architecture surrounded us. I noticed litter strewn on the side of the pavement, but in not nearly as large quantities as the UK. Smoking also seemed to have caught on around here.

These were fleeting observations and my main concern was with what Miranda thought had happened to her. Understandably she looked stupefied, and did not say anything when I asked how she was, but when I saw Zeus walking off, she followed us without faltering.

Zeus was no longer invisible, and I can't imagine what Miranda must have thought when she realised, if she did at this point, that I was with Zeus. We walked - quickly for some reason - over the crossroads further down the street. The roads became more and more congested

as we went (as though bad traffic followed me around). We took the second left and found the Hotel Elbe in the middle of the next street, on the right. Zeus held open the double doors for us, and we were soon approaching a vacant segment of the reception desk.

Zeus booked two rooms for an overnight stay. We took an elevator to one of the rooms.

"Why two rooms?" I said, as the three of us got inside, Miranda still looking something like a zombie.

"I don't need one," said Zeus, "So one for you; one for Miranda."

Feeling silly for asking, I turned to the latter, and asked, "Would you like a drink?"

She paused for a moment, then shook her head absent-mindedly.

Zeus went around the room closing the ochre, dusty curtains, and I watched, but then I heard Miranda, stumbling to say something.

"I... But I... I... I haven't any luggage."

Zeus raised a finger, as if to say 'I'll fix that', and he paced over to an empty space on the left side of the room. In Miranda's full view, he conjured up a suitcase, which appeared in a puff of quickly diffusing pink smoke. She screamed, and fell back onto the brown sofa. Zeus walked away from the suitcase, then curled his finger at it as a gesture for it to follow. It did. As though watching a mouse wending its way towards her on the floor, Miranda squeaked and whimpered on the sofa as the suitcase followed Zeus so that it stopped just in front of her.

"Your luggage," he said.

"Go easy," I mumbled in Zeus's ear, not wanting to frighten our guest away this time. Miranda did not seem to have heard; she was sitting, transfixed, staring at the suitcase.

"So it is true..." she sobbed, as though soliloquising to it. "You really have magic powers."

"He does," I said. Zeus looked at me as though at a traitor.

"How many times?" he said, with gritted teeth, "I do not do magic."

Miranda re-discovered the use of her neck and voice, and looked up to protest:

"No, of course not," she said, "conjuring up a suitcase from

thin air is... well, it happens all the time."

The characteristic sound of the drumming of rain against the windows came from outside. "Oh dear," I said absently, "it's raining."

"No it isn't," said Zeus, and as he said it, the drumming of the raindrops gradually ceased, and the Sun came out from behind the clouds, illuminating the Hamburg hotel room quite sublimely.

"Well done Zeus," I said, "Thanks."

"But just a moment!" Miranda exclaimed. "How...?"

"Don't worry about it," said Zeus, approaching her and holding out his hand, "I'm sorry I forgot to introduce myself. Zeus Ganymede."

Miranda was wary, understandably. She looked at Zeus's hand cautiously for a while.

"My research has shown that it is customary to greet a human in this way, is it not?"

I don't know why, but at this, Miranda shook his hand. When the hands withdrew, Zeus pointed at the television set, which came to life with the news. Miranda let out a short gasp, maybe at the sight of the devastating floods being seen on the screen, but more probably at the fact that Zeus's finger could act as a remote control.

We watched the scenes of devastation unfold – homes being destroyed, cars being washed away. I didn't know if Miranda could understand, but, listening to the German commentary I could hear that these were flash floods in Cape Town, submerging half the city. Aid was being refused from many major nations, who were too caught up in their military pursuits against each other.

"Oberon Furrow," said the presenter, as the news story changed, at which I perked up considerably and my muscles tightened. The presenter insisted I had been christened 'the miracle maker', explaining that I had been 'seen at my work place - Yenom Accounting Ltd in England - performing what managing director, Sean Branch, could only describe as magic'.

Then, horror of all horrors, John Eaves appeared on the screen, looking quietly smug, in the lobby of Yenom, with a reporter sticking a potato-sized microphone nearly down his throat.

"Yes," said John, "it was an absolute shock to say the least." His words were dubbed over in German. "I saw it all, you know. First, he was acting oddly, shouting out random things." He pushed the microphone away from his mouth awkwardly. "Then he stood up and

made my computer explode, just by looking at it with a shifty gaze - I was lucky to be agile enough to escape unharmed, the blast was so big. I know it was him: after that he went to the ground floor office and openly admitted that he was God who had returned in all his splendour. He made all of the computers levitate, and then vanished in a puff of rainbow smoke."

"What?" I said to Zeus, "Levitation? Puff of smoke? Where do they get all this?"

"Exaggeration," Zeus replied. It was back to the studio on the television.

Zeus switched off the television without using a single button.

"Now what?" I said.

"Firstly," Zeus answered, "don't panic."

"Ha!" said Miranda, "Don't panic? This is serious now! Now that news has reached Deutschland, we can't be safe at all."

"So the reporters will come after me? Does anyone know where I am?" I was stood up, but holding on to the arm of the sofa for support. I was aware of quivering violently, and I felt silly being so frightened. Why did I get so nervous? That was beside the point; I continued my panicking: "Has the press followed me to Hamburg? Zeus! Tell me!"

"All right, all right, if you really wish to know."

"I do wish to know. I think I do."

"Right. Yes, yes, DNA, and yes."

"What?!" I shrieked, becoming frustrated.

"Those are the answers to your questions, in the order you asked them."

"Well I can't remember what I said!"

"You asked if the reporters were going to come after you. They are. You asked if anyone knew where you were. Hundreds of people do." With every question Zeus answered, I sank lower and lower into my seat, and shivered with progressively increasing amplitudes. "You asked why you got so nervous. That's in your chemical make-up."

"He didn't," said Miranda, but the voice of sanity was ignored.

"You asked if anyone had followed you to Hamburg. They have."

I looked at Zeus. He smiled back.

"Well you did ask," he said.

"But... but when are they coming?"
There was a knock at the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"This is serious then?"

"I believe so. I mean it's one thing for..." I pointed to the maps.

"Yes, and there's some news about that, too. You'll be interested."

"I see. The point is this: you know that Earth humans are one of those species that has... violent tendencies?"

"Now, now," said Marcus, "I am quite aware that these war-like races do exist in their minority. It appears to be part of their nature – I know that: my father was among those to research it. I still have a lot of his original papers about the psychology behind it, but there were so many prerequisites to comprehending it that it became too cumbersome for curiosity alone. Other work mounted up on me before I finished reading the first one."

"I did not realise there was a full study on it."

"Oh yes."

"I gather that the humans themselves do not understand their own brain chemistry."

"Do they not? Well, it is a very complex organ. The neurology of any sentient brain is a complicated matter indeed. Just a few loose ends to tie up I suppose?"

"No, I think it's more incomplete than that," I said awkwardly.

"Well, I suspect they're nearly there really. So what was it you wanted to tell me?"

"It is about the concept of war."

"Yes?"

"I'll get straight to the point. Nuclear fusion is being used to create powerful weaponry." Marcus was silent for a while. He stared at me, trying to extract meaning from an already clear-cut statement.

"When you say 'weaponry', I presume you mean *constructive detonations*." I should have known the word would have caused a dispute. Yes, I was in the 'no' camp when the fabrication of a word for the devices that cause war-like devastation was under neological deliberation.

"I'm afraid not. They are planning to use them... against others."

"Against their own people?"

"I was discussing the equally bizarre concept of *currency* with

one human, you see..."

"That's very brave of you."

"Thank you. You see, they don't really see each other as all being the same race. You know about their divisions I presume? The planet appears to be arbitrarily divided into about – 193 I think – separate 'places', called nations."

"I do know about that, yes, but it's an advanced topic. As I say, my field of work does not really take me into those domains. Being in this position in Corfizz probably makes me more ignorant, rather than less. I'll make a note of that."

"Anyway – that was just a side point. They wouldn't say they were – forgive my language – 'attacking' their own people. They would be attacking other nations using this... this weaponry."

"I think this conversation has gone too far..." he said. I thought I had noticed before, but was not quite certain. But when he began to cry so freely in front of me, my suspicion that his eyes were welling up was confirmed.

"I can't cope with it!" he wailed, and I felt tears developing in my own eyes. "I can't do it any more!"

"Please, Mr. Jule," I said helplessly.

"Look!" he cried, standing up, taking some papers from a shelf and shoving them on the desk. "Look what we've found now!"

I looked. And I understood his vexation.

"This is..." I began, trying to find a word.

"How can we help each other," he continued, getting into a state, "*How can we help each other when they just want to kill each other? How – how – can we save... a world? How can we save their world when they don't want to be saved?*"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I jumped out of my skin. Coming from behind the door was an ever-growing cacophony of people talking, hustling and bustling around and knocking furiously, not only on the door but the walls too. Over this constant background there were some people - most probably reporters - yelling at the top of their voice things like 'Mr. Furrow we know you're in there!' and 'God is in that room!' It sounded as though some public interest had already been mustered, as a lot of the speech was in German.

"How did they find out I was here?" I said to Zeus, who was leaning against the back of the sofa as if nothing was happening. It sounded as though the reporters would want to break the door down here as well!

"They get everywhere, the press," said Miranda, wisely, but with a note of utter terror in her voice.

"Oh my God."

"Yes?"

"Stop making jokes at a time like this and get us out of here!"

"Why?" Zeus was so amazingly calm that a peculiar sensation washed over me, as though all panic was being drained out of me. I found I could start to think logically.

"Well, I don't want to face the press."

"As you wish. Talk to them with your back to them. I've made myself invisible. We can have some real fun with this. Hand out signed photographs. Do something spectacular."

"All right, Zeus, could you make it snow out in the corridor please?"

"Snow?"

"Yes. In the corridor."

"What an intriguing suggestion. I like your style."

"What's going on?" said Miranda, not daring to get up from the sofa, obviously in shock.

Gradually, the noise from outside the door changed. It changed in a similar way to how my mood had changed at Zeus's relaxed attitude. It became subdued. One woman screamed, and then there was a thud. And soon the cries of 'Oberon the god' turned to 'It's snowing in the corridor!'

"We can watch it from here," said Zeus, switching on the

television. I folded my arms and stood next to Zeus in front of the television. The noise had now doubled. I could see a crowd on the screen - a crowd of people, some with video recording equipment, some with microphones, some trying to talk to the cameras about the scene (and failing), and some violent people just trying to push through. Two women were unconscious on the floor, and were being ignored. But most weird of all, was the snow that was falling all over their gaping faces.

"God has caused a miracle," said a woman reporter with an exceedingly strong American accent. She then got pushed aside by a man with a black leather jacket, trying to reach the front. I chuckled at the sheer madness of it all.

"Look," said Zeus. I looked carefully at the television screen. In between people's legs there was a grey something, moving about. It turned its head towards the camera, and I saw what it was: a baby rhinoceros. As soon as the people in the crowd realised that it was there, they all shrieked in unison and in one gigantic frightened leap backwards, they pushed the door of the room down, causing the dust to sweep upwards as though from a steam vent. The television screen blacked out, and all of the reporters and journalists and eager passers-by were mangled together in a heap on the other side of the room.

Then, as though Chaos itself was in a delirious insanity, I began to feel another extraordinary sensation. I could no longer feel the floor beneath my feet. Predicting the worst, I slowly turned my head down to the floor. My feet were not on it. On looking up, I found accordingly that there was a gradually smaller distance between the top of my head and the ceiling. I was levitating! By this time, the struggle on the floor had managed to disperse itself, and the original noise returned, but louder and much more fierce. Any moment now they would advance on me in a massive swarm. I felt tense and hot. But Zeus's silence and peacefulness calmed me down. Looking at them from above, after all, I felt in control.

"It's God!"

"Er ist Gott! Er ist Gott!"

"He's flying!"

But the swarm failed to materialise. Two authoritative-looking men had entered the room and had stepped with astonishing ease to the front. One man had a long brown jacket on and was clearly taller than

everyone else. He had an outstretched hand, and in this hand was an open wallet, displaying a badge and identity card. The man with him was wearing a suit, dark glasses and had arms folded. Following these two men came a rush of police officers, who actually managed to rope off the two halves of the room, stopping any advance from the crowd.

"Nobody move!" shouted the man with the badge, who, with Miranda and me, was now the only other person on my side of the rope. He had an American accent. "Silence!" By no means was there silence. "Silence!" he shouted, with his assisting police officers repeating the instruction in German. Eventually, the noise quietened down, although there were still some whispers in the background, and some nervous murmuring. "I am a detective from the CIA. Mr. Furrow, we have reason to believe you have been exercising a form of terrorism by misleading and deceiving the public and disturbing peace, through the use of spontaneous magical tricks..."

"Magical tricks?" I repeated, raising my eyebrows. I was by no means calm, collected and confident at this point - I was shivering, and I had no idea where I should put my hands while I was floating above them all.

"We do not know how you do them, but they are merely tricks, designed to terrorise..."

"I think you may need some convincing," I said. All I had to do was think of something I wanted to happen, and Zeus, who was watching from the sofa, would do the rest.

'Make him levitate too,' I thought.

The detective screamed. There was a chorus of gasps from the crowd. His feet were hovering above the ground, and his mouth and eyes were wide open. Before long, the detective and I were level, floating in mid-air, staring at each other, and being stared at ourselves by the on-looking riveted groups below.

"Perhaps now," I said, "we can have a proper chat."

"Put me down now! That is an order."

"Think of a number. Any number with no limits whatsoever."

"What is this?" said the detective, "A magic show?"

"Just do it!"

"All right, I have a number."

"What is it, Zeus?" I thought. Zeus told me the number.

"Oh?" I said, "Think you can outsmart me by using fractions,

eh? Well I know your number is two-hundred and thirty-seven and two-thirds."

The detective was speechless for a few seconds. I simply smiled. Then the detective found his words:

"I don't know how you do it but all of this can be explained logically. Now put me down!"

In precisely the style of a cartoons or comedy, I asked Zeus to drop the detective to the floor suddenly, as if gravity had just been reset. The man grunted as he hit the ground, and simultaneously pulled out a gun whilst picking himself up. He was shaking now.

"You obviously require more convincing evidence," I said.

"Zeus, can you relay some facts about him to me?"

"I can tell you, Detective Hardiman," I continued, "that you are 1.8 metres tall, and are thirty-four years old, and live in a comfortable detached house in Lansing, Michigan."

"How did you get hold of this information?" shouted Mr. Hardiman. "You're a stalker too are you?"

"You are older than me, detective, so how could it be that I know you attended Central Michigan University where you obtained your degree in law; you lost your first tooth when you were six years old, and you suffer from athlete's foot..." As I said all of this, the face of the detective grew more and more confused, and more and more agitated, as though he could not believe what he was hearing, "...You like playing baseball and you used to enjoy computer games as a child; your wife is called Maria and she is thirty-two; you have an index-linked pension and..."

"Stop!" shouted the detective as soon as he could muster the courage. "You are going down for terrorism and stalking now! What sort of a criminal openly admits that?"

"You," I said, following Zeus's instructions and pointing to a woman who was cowering in the left-hand corner with a video camera. She pulled the camera away from her pale face, and her teeth began chattering, "Your name is Lauren Jones, a reporter from London. Your husband is called Jim, your children are called Amy and Frederick and you live in a top-floor apartment in Euston. You are thirty-seven and are actively dreading the time you reach forty."

"Stalking multiple people eh?" Detective Hardiman sneered, with his hands on his hips.

Oberon then pointed to a man from the public. He was a short tanned man wearing casual attire, and was just as shocked as everyone else.

"Sie heißen Marcus und Sie ist achtundzwanzig Jahre alt. Sie hat am zweiundzwanzigsten Mai Geburtstag und Sie hat zwei Brüdern aber keine Schwestern. Sie auch hat ein klein Hund - er heißt Oznob."

"Unglaublich," whispered Marcus.

"I think," I said to the detective, "that you will find no evidence of my ever having been in Hamburg before, yet Marcus has lived here all his life, haven't you Marcus?"

"Ja," stammered the man in the crowd.

"We'll have to check up on that," said the detective with a sly look, "but it is nevertheless simple to find out such information about a person over the Internet. All of this has a feasible explanation. You are now coming with me."

"Am I?" I said. 'Handcuff him,' I thought. And then a pair of handcuffs suddenly appeared, chaining Detective Hardiman's hands. He let out a short scream.

"Stop this nonsense!" he yelled.

"More evidence?" I said and sighed.

I used my power of thought to transport myself, Detective Hardiman and Zeus (who was invisible to everyone else) to the clouds... to be precise, the clouds above the Eiffel Tower in Paris, where we were floating in mid-air.

"What the hell is going on here?" yelled the detective. Despite having organised it, I myself did not realise what this trip would entail. I didn't know I had vertigo as well! The sight of flocks of birds passing us by, oblivious to how those human creatures had finally made it to the skies, was making me feel quite sick. To see the people below as mere dots, too; I could just make out the café that Zeus and I had gone to for lunch a couple of times too.

"We're above Paris," I said, suddenly coughing.

"I can see that!" shrieked the detective. It was difficult to speak with the wind blowing at full force into your face. Of course, my purpose was to convince the detective as much as possible that we were not criminals, magicians or con artists, so after Zeus co-ordinated a quick, inexorable spin around the tower's spire, I asked Zeus to get us away from here.

I wasn't expecting him to transmogrify us to the sky above Miami Beach, however.

"Miami Beach?!" Mr. Hardiman exclaimed.

"Indeed," I said, "You know about the Miami miracles I trust?"

The detective did not answer. He was too busy being stupefied by what he was seeing. He had rubbed his eyes several times.

In quick succession, Zeus transported us to the clouds above the Angel Falls of Venezuela, Himeji castle in Tokyo, the Sydney Opera house and St. Stevens Tower in London before returning us to the room in Hamburg. It had made both the detective and I very dizzy indeed, but Zeus had been laughing constantly. The crowd of people that were behind the rope were still in the room, open-mouthed and talking loudly about what they had seen. The police were still restraining the crowd from breaching the rope.

"Vanished," they kept whispering, along with:

"Did you see it? No mirrors you know..."

"I don't believe it..."

and "It's a miracle."

There were two women and two men unconscious on the floor, who had evidently fainted in shock. They were being mostly ignored. It took the detective a long time to compose himself - he spent many minutes sitting on the arm of sofa speechless. It took the detective a longer period of time afterwards to silence the crowd once more for further interrogation. I, in the meantime, had levitated back to the ceiling.

"Just before you say anything, Detective Hardiman," I said, "I would like to bring to the room..." The baby rhinoceros appeared right next to him, "...my rhinoceros."

This incurred an uproar from the detective and from the crowd that took a considerable amount of time to dampen. Miranda screamed, and the detective turned to face her as though it was the first time he had seen her. It probably was, in fact.

"How did you get here?" he asked her, quite forcefully.

"I..."

"Leave her alone," I said, "She was here before any of you came."

"I have no idea what magic school you attended," the detective said, changing the subject, "but I still have the evidence and the

authority to arrest you for terrorism in the form of deception and unlawful breach of privacy. Therefore, God or not God, you will have to come with me, Mr. Furrow."

Another raucous riveting of the crowd had been instigated, and the detective sighed at the frustration of having to silence it so many times.

"Excuse me, Detective Hardiman," I said, "If I can prove that I'm a god then surely I don't belong to this planet's laws, and I'm free to go."

There was an uproar from the crowd after everything that was said, and the detective didn't bother to stop it now.

"We do have a foreign policy," retorted the detective.

"But you don't have a God policy."

"Can you prove that you are God though?"

"Haven't I already done that?" There was a long and awkward pause. "Well?"

"No."

"Zeus," I said, aloud, "Reveal yourself."

Contrary to what I had expected, Zeus revealed himself bit by bit in the middle of the room. His hand appeared first (one woman fainted) and then both his arms, followed by his entire thorax. After that, his neck appeared, then his feet, then legs (one man fainted), and finally his head. By this time, everyone in the crowd was holding on to someone else for security.

"Good day," said Zeus. This incurred the most almighty of the uproars. The police had difficulty containing them.

"And who are you?" said the detective.

"Well you see," I replied, "I am not God. But Zeus Ganymede, here, is."

"Pleased to meet you," said Zeus, shaking the detective's hand.

"This is a hoax," said the detective, throwing aside god's hand. "It is one entire, gigantic hoax." There was an assortment of cheers and boos from the crowd. "You two must be the first partners in crime that are also the most incredible magicians. Well it doesn't fool me. You can throw what you like at me."

Zeus took a large strafe to the right, and then a plethora of fish - herring, cod, plaice, haddock, trout, puffer fish, goldfish and even a few species that were unrecognisable or extinct - shattered the window

as they careered into the room and splattered Detective Hardiman to the ground. This time there was a mix of laughs, shouts, cries and gasps from the crowd. Oberon was amongst those that were laughing. After a minute or so, the shower ceased.

"Even fish?" said Zeus, as the detective pulled himself out of the heap of fish in the centre of the room.

"Very funny," he said through gritted teeth. As he was about to advance on Zeus, another man appeared in front of him, causing the detective to collide with him and fall back to the floor. The man that had appeared had his arms folded, had a moustache and an outlandish grey haircut, and attracted a massive gasp and several cries of anguish from the crowd. Even I had to be surprised. The man was Albert Einstein.

Detective Hardiman screamed, stood up and got as far away from Einstein as possible.

"*Was...*" said Einstein, looking disturbed and discombobulated as he indicated me, floating above him, and then the rhinoceros below him, all the while wrinkling his nose at the fishy smell. Zeus quickly made him disappear.

When the noise from the crowd had subsided, Zeus and I clicked our fingers in unison, and vanished.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"What on Zirth are we doing here?" I shouted at Zeus. He had, for some unfathomable reason, transported us to the corridor just outside the room. Since the door was still open, it was only a matter of seconds before somebody spotted us. I felt the flames of fright marauding up my spine.

"Why not?" Zeus replied. And we ran.

We did not stop to speak to any of the reporters that were climbing the stairs, and Zeus simply transported anybody that was in our way to a point behind us as we went. When we reached the door, Zeus vanished, saying "back in a moment."

I was forced to dash, alone, as fast as I could possibly go, through the doors of the Hotel Elbe and through the streets of Hamburg to avoid the oncoming crowd of reporters. It was raining, and the traffic on the roads made the escape more challenging. When I was a safe distance down the street, I slowed down, at which point Zeus reappeared next to me.

"Look," he said. I turned to see what he was talking about. What I saw made me stagger back in surprise. There was a new building there, sandwiched between the front doors of the Hotel Elbe and the apartments that were opposite it. The building was made of red brick, had a tower at each corner, and was lined at its edges with sparkling gold. In short, Zeus had conjured up a palace - a palace in the middle of Hamburg. He had even arranged for through traffic: there were cars descending the drawbridge, clearly having come *through* the palace.

I looked at Zeus. "Well done. You've done a good job on that."

"I can do it, no matter how absurd. For example..."

On top of one of the palace's towers, there had appeared another building, perched on the tower precariously; in fact, I was sure I could see it rock from side to side. This was a white building, quite a contrast to the one it was on. And it was rather more recognisable than Zeus's palace: it was the Taj Mahal.

"Let's go," I said, and we continued to run.

At the corner of the street, we found a long line of parked cars, most with television reporters and journalists stepping out, but there were also some assorted police vehicles. My panic rose to a level I thought previously inconceivable. This was heightened by the shrill

announcements that quickly emerged of:

"There he is!"

The rain spontaneously decided to pour ever more torrentially, which instantly caused me to panic beyond belief, and beg the ever-calm Zeus to get us away from there. He obliged, and I found myself staring at a television screen.

In fact, I was staring at several television screens arranged on multiple shelves next to each other. It did not take long to realise that I was in a TV store. The channel that all of the televisions were displaying was the news channel - a female news-reader was looking sombre as she read, quite monotonously, the report - a report that I found not just disheartening, but shocking. Somebody outside a radio telescope started talking about the issue.

"It seems radio astronomers have been packing their bags for years, and we could well be the last ones. It's satellite communications; it should never have become so ubiquitous when they launched those few hundred satellites for mobiles."

"Radio waves from space," said the studio presenter, "are impeded and lost when they interfere with the radio waves being transferred between communicative satellites currently orbiting Earth. With severe cuts in the US government's funding of NASA, the future looks grim for space research..."

I sighed. Zeus was looking out at the doorway of the TV store.

"Hey," came a voice from behind me. I spun around to see the shop assistant - a tall and burly man with a conspicuously spiky haircut. "Are you grieving?" he asked, in German.

Thankfully (though surprising, too, seen as the man was surrounded by televisions), the man did not seem to recognise me.

"*Nein*," I replied, and then on an instinct, I asked him (in German): "Do you know what the electric charge of an electron is?"

"The what charge of a what?"

"What's the largest planet in the Solar System?"

"Well... I don't know..."

"Who discovered the first laws of gravitation?"

"Er..."

"Don't worry about it."

The man evidently did not intend to worry about it. He simply shrugged and walked off to the back room. I looked to the door of the

TV store, and then found a question to ask Zeus:

"How far is this from where we came from?"

"It's in the same street."

"What? Well get us further away!"

"Hey, aren't you that Oberon Furrow?" came the voice of the shop-keeper from behind us. I shot around in a state of panic to see the man holding a TV-sized box. I gave the man a small wave, before Zeus teleported us away...

...to another Hamburg street. Zeus immediately began running; I had no choice but to follow, though I was already out of breath. It looked as though the street went on forever, so it was mind-numbing to think where all the traffic came from. It would be difficult to hold a conversation with Zeus while the rain was drumming continuously into my face, so Zeus arranged it so that the rain suddenly changed direction. Nobody else seemed to notice this otherwise peculiar phenomenon.

"What did you think about that news report?" I asked, as we passed a tramp that was sitting and smoking in the alcove of a bank.

"I already knew it would happen. Remember? But yes, I agree that it's shocking, and extremely disheartening."

"Yes. I've come to see the attraction of astronomy and physics with quite some vehemence," I explained. Then, almost to myself, I said "I've realised the true vastness of the universe. It isn't just this fantastical zone beyond our usual planetary confines that you hear about occasionally on the news or at school, but a true, vivid and complex place with infinite beauty and possibility, beyond our wildest contemplation. And you've revealed that to me, Zeus, and I'd like to thank you."

"That was very well said, Oberon - very moving."

"You could have given me everything, you know," I continued, with sentimentality I may not have been capable of if this weren't the last chapter, "Made me rich and famous and all that, but you didn't."

"No. Most people would crave the luxury and happiness they think they will get from money, but it also provides one with power. But I already have that power, without the need to buy it with money. And being without luxury and money gives you a certain purpose in life, because you are constantly faced with challenges. If there were no challenges, you would be left with the ultimate truth: that there really

isn't any purpose to your existence."

I paused and thought for a moment. The world had seemed to come to a standstill and I was entirely unaware of anything else going on, even though I was still running down the street of Hamburg in the rain with the sound of the traffic on the road and the usual polluted air and ill-kept buildings surrounding me. I finally replied:

"So there is no purpose? There is no meaning? No providence after all?"

"Not at all. The nearest thing that you can get to providence is me. I am only too glad that I picked you as my Earthly contact, my link to the lesser dimensions. The beings of the fourth dimension up to the ninth think that I'm rather crazy and eccentric to be mingling with some of the most primitive of species," (I did not care to refute this), "but I have found it a most thrilling and interesting experience to say the least."

We had just turned a street corner, and my eyes caught on something that brought me swiftly out of my sentimental train of thought. I felt as if I had abruptly been awoken from a dream world, and back into a hostile environment - the abject and urban environment that was, ultimately, my habitat. At no point in my life did I feel more strongly repulsed by my vile and abhorrent world, a world of hatred and ignorance.

There was a reporter standing in front of us, a male reporter with a microphone and a notepad that was wearing a suit; he did not mind that he was drenched in rain. However, it was not the sight of the reporter that shocked me, it was that the reporter was accompanied by Detective Hardiman, brandishing his gun. Zeus and I stopped dead in our tracks. The reporter approached us

"No," said the detective, and the reporter stopped, "These men are dangerous. Stay where you are. We have them cornered now."

All around us, a circle of police officers had formed and were putting up a rope boundary. A substantial crowd was being attracted. The rain continued just in the background, as if it had been silenced by the tension in the middle of the square (how the detective had found an area with no cars in it was anybody's guess).

Zeus and I looked at each other. "You really think being surrounded by policemen will restrain me?" said Zeus to the detective, transporting himself to the other side of him. There was a gasp from

the ever-growing crowd, and Detective Hardiman turned around with his gun still locked on him.

"When I can do this?" continued Zeus, suddenly vanishing and reappearing on top of the roof of the apartments opposite them. He then went to three more random positions in quick succession before returning to his original place.

"No more tricks!" shouted the detective, sweating.

"Why don't you do one, detective?" said Zeus, "To prove that I am as I say I am, why don't you try... firing your gun at me?"

This incurred an uprising of muttering amongst the crowd, even among the police officers who were weakly pushing back the crowd from advancing any further. The detective still had his gun aimed at Zeus.

"Do you want me to do it?" said Zeus with a care-free sigh, "Look." The gun floated effortlessly out of the detective's hand and glided across the gap to Zeus's hand, swivelling as it went so that it was aiming at the detective. I looked worriedly at Zeus, and he was temporarily paralysed from movement, or from hearing any of the shouts, cries and gasps coming from the crowd around them.

Zeus continued calmly. "Look," he said again, and turned the gun to face himself. The detective frowned, and Zeus pulled the trigger once. "Nothing," he said pulling it twice more to illustrate the point. "Do you want to try?"

The detective's eyes were wide, and he could be seen to shiver slightly. Even the reporter was backing away slowly.

"But..." said the detective, "but... where did the... bullets go?"

"Oh you want them back do you?" Zeus put his hand into his trouser pocket and produced three bullets that he handed to Detective Hardiman. "Have to be awkward don't you?" It took the detective a few seconds of silence before he could take them.

"What's this?" he said, inspecting one of the bullets. He then pulled a rolled up piece of paper away from it, and unravelled it. "It says: 'I told you so'." The detective raised his gun at Zeus.

"You've run out of ammo," said Zeus. He pulled the trigger, and found that Zeus was indeed correct, so he threw the gun with full force at him. It went straight through him as if he weren't even there.

Now the detective's mouth and eyes were open wide, and the reporter was nowhere to be seen. Zeus smiled, and then without any

warning transformed himself into the small rhinoceros, then a blackbird, then Gaia the hamster, and then into a stream of white smoke. Before he had the chance to do or say anything, Zeus - as the smoke - floated up and around the detective before drifting straight upwards. The rain ceased, and a lone spotlight from nowhere illuminated me, the detective and the smoke particles.

Then, Zeus drifted higher and higher, and as he did so, the sun gradually came out from behind the clouds. The white smoke was still visible in front of the sun, and appeared to circle it a few times. Then a strange transformation could be seen taking place. The sun was developing grey patches on it, and the sky was becoming darker and darker. Nobody on the ground moved, or indeed could move, as they watched the star turn into the moon, and the stars come out in all their glory - one of the clearest night skies I had ever experienced.

Zeus sped rapidly back to the ground and morphed into his usual self again.

"You see," he explained, "I am a cross-section – a cross-section of a ten-dimensional god, and ten-dimensional gods cannot fit into three-dimensional worlds, of course."

"OK," said the detective, "OK. I believe you. This is... absolutely incredible." He looked up to the sky. "The night sky is clearer than I've ever seen in my life. All of these stars..."

"It's a shame isn't it?" said Zeus, "You think it's so beautiful, and yet you pollute it with radio waves, you pollute it with light; you pollute your environment with fumes without thinking. You are killing science and you are killing yourselves."

There was a long pause, perhaps awkward, perhaps just dramatic.

The detective cleared his throat. He spoke in a deeper and louder tone, so that all the crowd could hear him. "On behalf, not only of my nation, but of all the nations, I would like to ask you, Zeus Ganymede, the ten-dimensional god, as you say, to perform us one planetary service. It will not only prove your identity to us and grant your freedom, but... change our society forever, to one like this, where the stars, as you've shown us, always shine so brightly. I would like you to make this world better... for everyone... stop the War; nobody wanted it; stop crime in its tracks; cease the injustice. As a... being... with such powers, you could do that could you not? And the Earth, or

the people of Earth, will be eternally in your debt.

"Do you... do you accept, Zeus?"

There was a long and excruciatingly awkward silence, the longest silence I had known. Would Zeus accept? I could not work out for myself what Zeus's decision might be, but for the first instance Zeus seemed to be taking a long time to answer. He had mastered the passing of time and, it seemed, had completed his research of the lesser worlds. I am quite sure he knew what his answer would be straight away – before the proposition was even made to him, in fact! He must have been pausing purely for the dramatic effect. After a period of time beyond counting, he took a breath to speak.

"No," he said. The detective perked up with a look of anguish, shock and despair. "No. I will not do it."

"Well then it is a hoax! You are a computer generated illusion – a hologram! - controlled by this terrorist magician, Oberon Furrow." The crowd became rowdy in agreement with the detective. "I was right all along! It is nothing more than a grand illusion."

"I will not comply with your request," said Zeus, with a masterful tone that shouted down the detective, "because I do not believe you deserve it. I do not think this planet is worthy of it. Do you know why? Well, I can see the future, even see all possible futures, and in that future in which you transform your old ways, and made this world better, as good as it can be, it makes no difference. After little more than a century the world would be in just as much a state as it is in now. Greed would continue to rise again and all hellish war would break out. I have seen it. You are a belligerent race of people by nature and I wish I'd never come here, except if it were to see Oberon, a member of one of the comparatively small groups of people that isn't hell bent on sheer selfishness."

Zeus and I vanished.

We reappeared at my home, in the lounge, next to the drawn curtains. There were crowds upon crowds of people in the house, reporters, journalists and people who looked as though they had just wandered in for the fun of it. I was surrounded by them, but none of them seemed to have noticed!

"Don't worry," said Zeus, "I've made us both invisible. You see what sort of people they are? They have broken into your property, and are spreading television rumours, turning over everything they can

find to reveal you either as God himself or as an imposter, even though you are neither, and they probably know it."

"You sound very angry, Zeus."

"I certainly am. Let us go."

We vanished once more, and this time appeared in the clouds. We were in the clouds looking down at London. I could see St. Steven's tower and Westminster from here, and halted traffic jams.

"I am going to speed up time," Zeus announced, and disappeared. I was left feeling relatively unsafe. This was not just because of the fact that I was floating in a cloud and feeling extreme vertigo, but because I knew nuclear weapons could be dropping mercilessly on the city at any moment. In a way I knew what was to happen, but in a way, I didn't.

Zeus reappeared next to me, and a strange time phenomena was occurring below us. Everything was going in fast motion, as if somebody had pressed a fast-forward button on the television. The clouds were moving hastily through us, and the people and vehicles below us, just as large as coloured dots, were moving in blurs.

Then, the worst happened. It was in fast motion, and so I could not see details, but it shocked me to the point of nearly falling out of the sky (literally). I placed my hand to my chest. It came so abruptly, and more abruptly still did it devastate the entire scene. From a hustling, bustling, overpopulated centre of the UK's capital, to an explosion of flame and then a littered wasteland.

It was our turn to move fast now. We began flying through the sky at top speed, looking down at the country, now both racing through time and through space. It was all the same, more or less. It was uniformly devastated. It was the most shocking and horrific sight I had ever known. We then sped up considerably, so that it was all just a grey haze. Then we stopped sharply.

"This is Gloucestershire," said Zeus. I barely recognised it.

"But why did they bomb Gloucestershire of all places?"

"People underestimated how many nuclear weapons were in production. Their power, with these bombs, overcame them, and remember, this is a world war. Much of the USA and the main cities in the rest of Europe, and even Asia, are in a similar state. But I don't really think you want to see it. The Eiffel Tower has fallen, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the castles of Tokyo... reduced to

ashes."

"What's left?"

"The third world countries in Africa are still more or less stable. Many places in South America are also still 'operating as normal', but without the richer societies they are lost without food and supplies. The poverty-stricken areas will now be left to starve. Several months have passed now. Eleven. Twelve. A year... I shall stop here."

Time slowed down back to normal speed, but there was not a huge difference, because in any time scale there was little life left to move.

"What's happening down there?" I said, looking down at my former home town. The oddest thing was happening... the littered and burnt-down buildings were being stripped from the ground itself and hurled at warp speed through the sky. It seemed that a lot of the big metal items were being attracted by something, and were pulling half of the land with them as they rocketed through the sky and out of the Earth's atmosphere. "What's going on?! Can you not stop this?"

"I think," said Zeus, "we had better go now."

The Earth was rotating silently, and orbiting its parent star, also silently. Parts of the planet were being ripped out and flung towards the one of the newcomers in this solar system - a collapsed star that had wandered over. The former dominant inhabitants of the planet Earth had not noticed its arrival by wormhole. It was no ordinary collapsed star. It was a magnetar, one with a massive magnetic attraction...

Not far from it in astronomical terms was another collapsed star, also ignored by the people of the planet as it too had strolled in recently through a giant wormhole. This, again, was quite a special one, because it had collapsed to a singularity, and was taking pleasure in devouring everything in sight. It was a black hole.

Quite why these two stars had chosen to have their malicious party in this quite harmless end of the western spiral arm of the galaxy was a topic of heated debate for some time on Zirth and other civilisations, not least because of the uproar it caused when the planet burst into a raging fireball. And then when it was hastily escorted through space by the magnetar...

Like a big bully throwing a basketball about an empty

playground, it hurled the planet into the black hole where it was instantly ripped into infinite strips of multi-coloured chaos; having been irradiated, squashed and stretched into a film of atoms in less than a second, being thrown into non-existence at the singularity was quite the final insult.

Gone. The universe had devoured it without mercy in less than five seconds.

The rest of the inhabitants in the universe, trying not to shudder at the nature of this death, found, after a while, that it could come to terms with its demise. It is true that in collaboration with eight other civilisations, Zirth had strived to keep the planet away from danger. It is true that in collaboration with five other sentient planetary inhabitants, the Zirthirans had drawn up detailed plans for taming the much feared natives of the Earth so that all thirteen of them could co-habit the universe in a state of ultimate harmony. But against the merciless and monstrous black hole, even Zirth was powerless. Yet the universe agrees: they were doomed anyway.

Meanwhile, constantly changing complex shapes of all sizes and colours were displaying themselves. They whirled around on a background that was never the same - sometimes it would be apparent as flat, and sometimes it would rotate as if it were a cube, and sometimes it would spin as a sphere, or develop small irregular 3D shapes on it or within it. And it was constantly changing colour too: from a lemon colour it changed sharply to a lilac, and then to azure, then jade green, then sapphire, and sometimes it would vanish to blackness completely.

All of this activity and all of this movement continued, throwing itself in all directions and seeming to be wholesomely incomprehensible. There was a mixture of sounds too... warping-like sounds that were quite indescribable and sounds that were perhaps produced by intelligence. There was a strange feeling of the place; it vibrated and shook and was hazy and ominous and altogether frightening.

On and on and on it went, until the final crash to the ground.